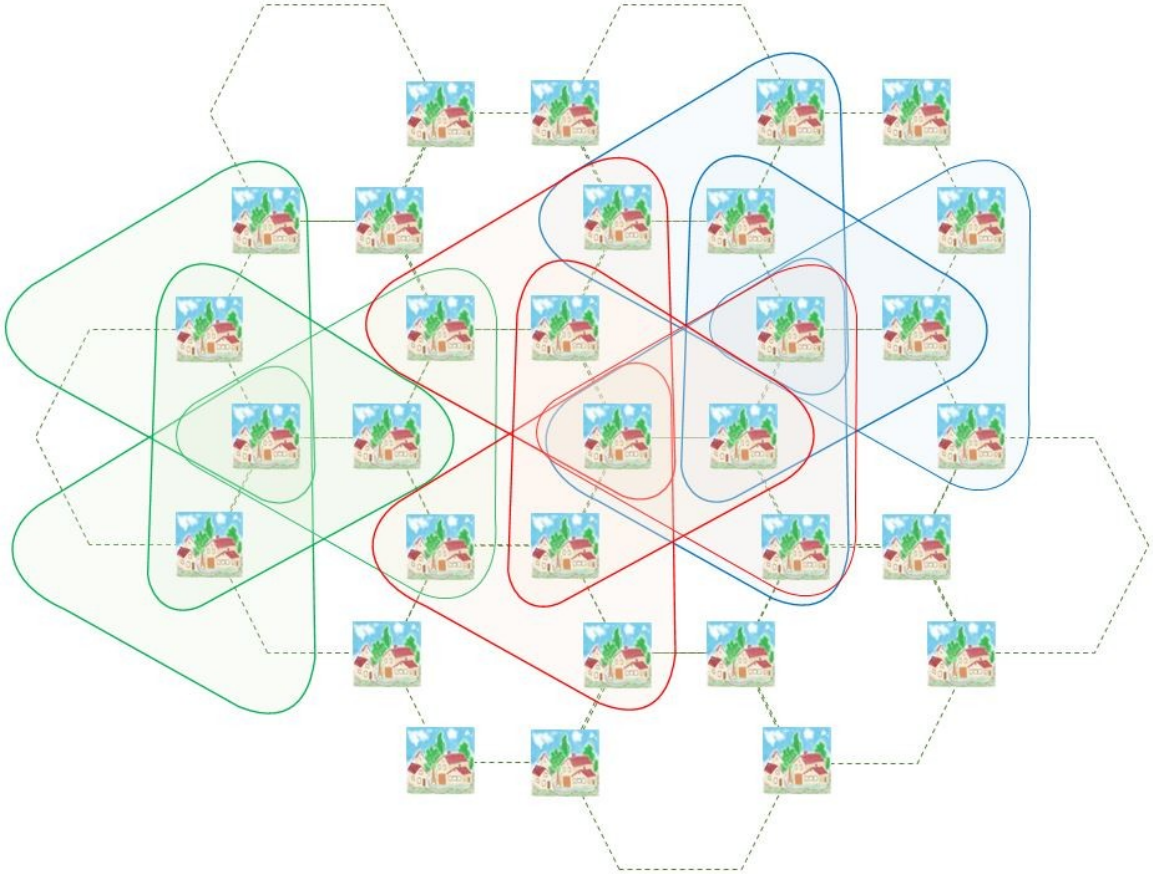
Cristian Dodita

Burkhard Sellke



Living together

Version 1.0 / November 28, 2025

ORIGINAL EDITION PDF format DIN A4

Semi-automated English translation from German, redacted by Cristian Dodita

Illustrations: Cristian Dodita, Burkhard Sellke.

Production and publishing: Cristian Dodita, Burkhard Sellke.

To all people who are alive today.

For all people who will live in the future.

Table of Contents

At Home

Great-Grandfather's Notes

I wasn't there when the decision was made. It suits me very well, though. I've always loved being in Grandpa's room. Admittedly, especially when he wasn't there. Grandpa Noram is in the hospital now and won't be returning to that room. He told Leyla and Simon that. I'm supposed to move into the room. It's his present for my eighteenth birthday.

The room has west-facing windows overlooking the garden. At sunset, when it's visible, it's flooded with light. The walls are whitewashed, and fascinating little objects are displayed on the horizontal wooden beams of the timber frame. They're probably mementos Grandpa collected on his many travels. Opposite the window hang a world map with colored, now faded, markings and a picture of him with my grandmother, from a time long before I was born—nothing else. Some of Grandpa's old furniture has been replaced by my bed and my desk. The wingback chair, however, remains. I love sitting in it, even though the upholstery is in dire need of repair.

I'm keeping Grandpa's bookcase, too. I'll add my own things to the top shelves. I don't own any books myself. There are hardly any printed books left at all, as far as I know. Most of the printed books that were of general interest were collected in community libraries and have gradually been made available electronically. Paper is precious. Today, only important new works of general knowledge remain in printed form. They are kept as backup copies in libraries, in case something bad happens again and the electronic media fail, as some of the older folks keep warning.

I've only read a few books in print so far. Holding a physical book in your hands, reading it, highlighting passages, and taking handwritten notes for studying is a completely different experience. This has been incredibly helpful to me throughout my school years. While it's only one way to learn, and many students rely solely on the communicator and downloaded documents from the MultiNet, the mentors always emphasize that the tactile and visual experience of a printed book is a crucial sensory exercise. My experience has certainly confirmed this. I was always a little sad

when, at the end of my study session, I had to return the used books to the PrintBot for recycling.

I'm excited. I've never seen the bottom compartment open before. The doors are stuck. I pull even harder, and they give way with a squeak. Behind the cabinet doors, I see countless small notebooks lined up and stacked. They look very old. So old that I hardly dare touch them. All of them have names and dates written on the covers and spines, in the same handwriting. *›All by a certain E. Faros...?‹* These notes certainly aren't by Grandpa; I recognize his handwriting. But the author shares our family name, so he must be a relative.

The light-colored imitation leather covers feel warm and soft. They've been written on with colored felt-tip pens. It must have been something like a permanent marker, because the writing seems to have seeped deep into the cover. It hasn't smudged despite the considerable wear. The cover of the notebook I'm holding is discolored, and the corners are badly worn. For a moment, I have the strange sensation of touching it, as if I were holding the author's palms. Then it's all gone. I also take out the last notebook from the bottom right. The dates in the titles cover many decades. They begin with »E. Faros Mar. - Jul. 2009« and, if I've indeed got the last notebook, they end with »E. Faros Apr. - Sep. 2049«.

›Forty years ago, and that was a very long time before I was born... what, when was Simon born? These are notebooks, obviously, something like a logbook, or maybe like diaries...‹ I muse, setting aside what I believe to be the last notebook. I'm glad I'm alone and have some peace and quiet. Not everything is finished in my new room, but that's not important to me right now. My heart pounds as I open the cover of the first notebook.

> *March 11, 2009*
>
> *I really don't know what this is all about? It's just insane! The whole world has basically gone bankrupt because of the speculation of a few bastards, and instead of throwing these bastards in jail, they're being bailed out with public funds and can carry on as before without any hindrance. It's just disgusting! Man! And at university, everyone's talking about it as if nothing's actually happened. Sure! Understandable! Here, among the wannabe yuppies, you don't really notice anything either. And then there are the so-called explanations from the*

Friedman-Hayek conspiracy theorists: Freedom through economic liberalism! That sort of thing shouldn't even be mentioned, let alone taught. But why am I getting worked up about it? The world belongs to money and those who sit on that money. They dictate to us how everything has to be, not me, the 21-year-old sociology student. What do I think I am? What do THEY think they are?

›When he wrote this entry, he was probably a bit older than I am now. But what is he writing about? What enrages him so much? What happened eighty years ago? That's the time before the Transformation, that much is clear. Fascinating...‹ I think to myself, settling into the armchair. I want to keep reading.

"Mika!" my mother calls. "Should I help you with the renovations? Or can you manage on your own?"

"I'm fine, thanks!" I call back, slightly annoyed.

I continue flipping through my notebook. The renovations will have to wait.

March 12, 2009

I met Adina today. She's beautiful. She was also in the cafeteria with her friend—what was her name again? Anyway, I don't think she saw me. I'm such an idiot! Why don't I dare to talk to her directly? I think it's so great that she doesn't want anything to do with those yuppie idiots. At least it seems like she's interested in more than just parties. I'd love to talk to her and see if she'd be open to changing the world, if she'd have the courage to stand up for it if necessary. Especially now that a person of color has finally become President of the United States, I hope that maybe worldwide change might be possible…

›Hmm, this feeling of shyness isn't unfamiliar to me either... the way people interact with each other hasn't really changed, it seems,‹ I think casually. I do notice, however, that it strikes me as odd that the author, in his brief daily entry, mixes social circumstances with his desire to speak to a woman—a matter too private for a logbook. *›But perhaps it's not a logbook as I know them...‹* The remark about the »person of color« also confuses me. I don't know how to interpret it. Suddenly, Ajola comes to mind, and how I interact with her. *›It must have been a completely different world back then...‹* I surmise thoughtfully.

Lares suddenly stands before me. I reflexively close the notebook and look at him. There is a clearly visible scratch on his cheek below his left eye.

"What happened to you?" I ask.

"Just a little mishap in the biology lab, nothing more..." he murmurs, looking around curiously.

"Oh, really, a little mishap?" I press him.

"I was working on my series of experiments with Carlo again, on campus. Then one of the oxygen cylinders tipped over, the carrying case went flying, and my head was in the way again," he says, giving me a mischievous wink.

I know he's not telling me everything, but I don't really care. I know he's good at taking care of himself, and also that he's been a bit more adventurous than usual lately. *›I really like the guy,‹* I remark in a burst of affection, and smile warmly at him. Lares is kneeling in front of the bottom of the bookcase, looking at the spines of the notebooks, but without touching them. He probably hasn't seen them before, but he doesn't seem particularly impressed.

"Come on, I'll help you paint the wall and then I'll work through my lab results from today," he suggests, and stands up again.

His tone leaves me no choice. I don't really feel like it yet, but I'm grateful for the help and I know I have to accept it immediately, otherwise he'll be gone again quickly.

“OK, let’s do it,” I say somewhat frantically, “I’ll just cover the floor.”

I put the book aside and quickly attach the drop cloth to the wooden floor and baseboard. Lares is already fiddling with the paint bucket. *›I should go to campus later this afternoon, take all the notebooks, and scan them into my personal MultiNet...‹* I think to myself as I try not to get in Lares' way. My brother is skilled and quick at painting, while I sometimes seem to have two left hands. I prefer to let him do it, even if he handles things too hastily and carelessly for my liking.

My gaze sweeps over the countless notebooks. *›What you have to say could be very interesting...‹* I carefully pack all the notebooks into two moving boxes and place them on the desk. Lares has finished painting the wall white and is now just standing there, grinning. Paint is dripping onto the floor. *›Good thing the floor is covered...‹* I take the paint roller from him and gently move him aside.

"You are a hero, that's enough," I tell him.

Lares looks at me disapprovingly and disappears without a word. *›Aha...‹* I carefully remove the cover and fold it up.

"I thought you were moving in here?" I hear Simon's voice. "But you seem to have changed your mind!" he adds with a smile.

My father is standing in the doorway, staring at the moving boxes. I ignore his teasing, grab one of the two boxes, and try to get past him. Simon doesn't budge an inch. I nudge him lightly with the box.

“Do you have any idea who this E. Faros was, who bears our name?” I ask him, pointing my chin at the notebooks stacked in the box.

Simon picks out a notebook and looks at it curiously. Clearly, he's never seen it before either.

"Hmm, I see these were written by E. Faros? It could be my grandfather Ethan, your great-grandfather, who collected all this. What are you going to do with the notebooks in the boxes? Throw them away?" he asks, horrified.

"No! I want to take them to campus. I've reserved some time at the ScanBot. I want to store these notebooks in my MultiNet. In electronic form, I can take them with me more easily and read them anywhere," I reply.

"Not a bad idea," my father murmurs, somewhat relieved. "I could help you carry the boxes if you like. I want to visit Grandpa again later, but I have a little time now."

He doesn't really look like he's eager to help me. But I'll take what I can get. Carrying both boxes alone would be pretty uncomfortable.

On the Way to Campus

Simon is already standing in front of the house, but I still need to reserve the necessary seats for us on the next InterMod bus to campus. My communicator shows an estimated time of about two and a half hours until arrival at campus. The bus will be here in about half an hour. *›That worked out well... this is the only bus ride of the day so far,‹* I note. Simon looks at me somewhat impatiently and starts walking ahead. Our small house is on the edge of our village community and almost ten minutes from the connecting road where the InterMod station is located. Simon walks briskly, and I have to hurry to keep up with him.

I remember that there used to be several trips per day. Now there are good overnight accommodations on campus, so many only travel to and from their settlements once a week. This saves energy and reduces noise and disturbance in the natural areas between the communities. It's certainly very good for the beings there not to be constantly disturbed by traffic on the connecting road. All the transport vehicles I'm familiar with are electrically powered and relatively quiet. They're also deliberately driven slowly to keep the noise level low. Nevertheless, they still pose a disturbance and a danger to the migrating living creatures.

I look along the road lined with old trees. Simon places the cardboard box on the ground in front of him and gestures for me to do the same. His face is half in shadow, half in the sunlight that has managed to penetrate the beech canopy and reach the ground. The road and the ground are already covered with the yellow-brown mantle of autumn. A jay squawks nearby, its excited flapping of wings quickly dissipating among the young acacias on the other side of the road. In the distance, I see the reason. A vehicle is approaching slowly. *›I can hardly hear anything, but the jay has already sounded the alarm...‹*

The small green and yellow bus stops and the driver waves us on. Eight of the ten seats are already taken. We take the last two free ones. *›Good occupancy again...‹* I remark as we start moving.

I notice that the seat cushions have been replaced. Now they're dark red and a bit softer than the old ones, which were brown and probably the original. *›This bus must be at least as old as Simon...‹* I guess, trying to sit as comfortably as possible with the cardboard box on my lap. Simon has stowed his box in the luggage compartment. But I want to read something on the way. Curiosity has gotten the better of me.

“Do you know anything about the topic of »money«?” I ask Simon.

My father looks at the hilly summer landscape and seems to be thinking.

“This term appears in the first notebook entry of Ethan’s that I read today. And he was quite upset about it,” I add.

“No, not too much,” says Simon, focused and thoughtful, “but Noram once told me when I was a child that everything used to revolve around money. People got paid for their work. Everyone then had to use it to buy everything they needed to live. And if there wasn’t enough money, people had to borrow it from institutions called »banks« or from other people who had it. And eventually, they had to pay it back, and more

than they had borrowed. Because of money, there were uprisings and even wars with many deaths and much destruction…”

"It sounds complicated and seems somehow very dangerous and completely unnecessary. We manage just fine without money! Don't we? Without these »banks« and these »wars«," I say, somewhat uncertainly.

Simon smiles in agreement. But I notice that his smile remains thoughtful.

“Yes, from our perspective today, everything that was considered normal before the Great Transformation seems somehow complicated, illogical, and even absurd. But you have to imagine that people lived together this way for thousands of years. For thousands of years, they considered it normal that everything should be marketable for money, including life itself…” I can still hear him say.

I have the feeling that my ancestor's notebooks describe a world I can't truly comprehend, or perhaps don't want to. Simon and I are both silent. I open the box on my lap and spontaneously pick out another notebook. Simon gazes, lost in thought, at the passing landscape, ignoring me. I open the notebook at random and read the next entry.

November 12, 2024

I can't quite grasp what's happening these days. I'm simply at a loss for words to describe my inner feelings about it. What Orwell described in »1984« comes pretty close to the dystopia emerging today, but it's still far from the technological possibilities that actually exist. Orwell only imagined what could happen in the worst-case scenario—we're living in the time when that dystopia is becoming reality.

The so-called »Corona pandemic« has apparently opened Pandora's box of digital possibilities. For the first time, an attempt was made by seemingly coordinated national governments to impose a digital identity on all global citizens, making the use of mobile digital devices almost unavoidable. The »Known Traveller Act«, thankfully only minimally enforced, was intended to ensure that only people identifiable as »healthy« via a digital vaccination certificate on their smartphone could travel by plane. Today, there is a concerted effort to further restrict the use of cash, thereby restricting access to goods

and services to people carrying a mobile digital device capable of complete identification. This is further compounded by the European Union's »Digital Services Act«, which opens the floodgates for the development of artificial intelligence software for spying on and manipulating social media...

I'm not against digitalization per se, but I've never warmed to the overuse of digital devices. I had hoped that »social media« would just be a fad that would eventually die out. I have to admit I was sorely mistaken—they're still here. Even worse, they're taken for granted, especially by the younger generations, the self-proclaimed »digital natives«. What's particularly disturbing, however, is that the narratives disseminated by mainstream media declare the digitalization of all areas of life a necessary condition and thus »normal«, and that, based on this, the government intends to enact laws to practically force all citizens into this »new normal«. This opens up a wide range of possibilities for restricting privacy, which has so far been considered »inviolable«, and thus also human dignity.

Looking back at everything that has happened this year alone, I get the impression that humanity seems to be on the cusp of a sweeping transformation. It's as if we're saying, »Yesterday we were on the brink, today we're taking a further step forward…«. The ongoing genocide in Gaza, the still-ongoing war in Ukraine and the associated military buildup in Europe, the collapse of the American empire, the economic rise of China and Russia along with the rest of the BRICS nations, the re-election of Trump as US president, and the collapse of the German coalition government are one side of the coin. The other side consists of the »visions« declared by the UN this year—the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact—as well as the biotechnology industry's plans for the future use of artificial intelligence to increase »innovation« in the production of genetically modified plants and other biochemical products.

I feel that I (and everyone close to me) am very strongly affected by this, even restricted in my freedom to develop – this is becoming

painfully clear to me right now as I write this. I long for change, I wish that this wouldn't happen the way it seems to be happening right now, but I feel powerless and, in a way, at its mercy… and that's not a pleasant feeling…

I'm a bit confused right now. Ethan's text describes a situation from the past that's very relevant again today. For him, it was probably a threatening situation back then. Today, however, I perceive what he feared as »normal«. I, and most of us, carry a communication device with us at all times, and I'm glad that, as long as it works correctly, it gives me the opportunity to access information, organize myself, and communicate with other people. *›Was that what my great-grandfather was afraid of? I hardly think so...‹* I muse, as my eyes reread the last paragraph of the notebook entry. I realize that I definitely don't feel any fear that my freedom is being restricted or my dignity disregarded. I suspect it must depend on the context. Ethan lived in a very different world. A world I can't even imagine.

The campus InterMod station is empty at this time. The bus parks right next to the charging station. The return trip display gives me almost three hours to spend on campus.

We get off the bus with the two boxes and head straight for the ScanBot. It's a few hundred meters to walk, and the boxes of notebooks are quite heavy. As we stride briskly, I admire the ScanBot's obviously recently completed location, seamlessly and rather inconspicuously attached to the library building. From a distance, I would hardly notice the addition if I didn't know it was there. I see no windows, but a large glass door that opens with a soft whir when Simon is detected by the motion sensor. *›I had imagined this renovation somewhat differently...‹* I remark, and follow my father inside. As expected, there's no one in the ScanBot's entrance area. Slightly to the right of the entrance, the control panel and the input/output flap are neatly integrated into the opposite wall. All the technology, which used to be clearly visible next to the library building, has now disappeared into a new brick room and is thus well protected from the elements.

Simon looks at me, somewhat surprised. Obviously, neither of us expected this change.

"Do you know who planned and implemented all this?" I hear Simon ask. "I mean this renovation? I haven't been here in ages..." my father says, looking around the

room.

"No, no idea, but it looks good and it was obviously necessary. We often talked about how the ScanBot needed a suitable, secure space that would also be accessible from inside the library. I'm curious how they'll get into the technical room," I say, finally putting my box down on the floor.

My arms ache and my fingers are a little numb, but I'm eager to try out the new setup. The terminal is ready to accept new scan jobs. I log into MultiNet at the console to specify the location where the scan results will be saved. Simon is already starting to insert the notebooks, one after the other, into the book slot. The notebooks disappear inside the machine with a soft hiss. After the last one, there's a quiet whirring sound, and the display shows: »Scan duration 08h53m43s«.

“I thought you’d improved the ScanBot’s processing?” Simon asks, smiling mischievously. “It still takes ages, it seems,” he teases me.

“Yes, but there are a lot of notebooks,” I reply. “My group has significantly improved the robotic page-turning arm. It can now handle four times the number of pages; the previous one was incredibly poorly assembled!” I retort cheekily, knowing that my father also worked on the project when he was a student. “But the text recognition team hasn’t finalized the new handwriting algorithms yet. They’ll need some time. They’re still in the testing phase, and Boris Aalbach always finds something to criticize…” I grumble defiantly afterward.

"Yes, Boris was very meticulous even back then, when he first took over the project in our generation. But he's turned out to be a good mentor, hasn't he?" he says, stacking the now-empty boxes next to the ScanBot flap so they're ready for the notebooks to be picked up. "Are you coming with me again right away?"

"No, I'm staying on campus a bit longer, working here with Ajola. Thanks for coming along! I'll need you again when I pick up the notebooks," I reply hopefully.

Simon is currently fiddling with his communicator.

“Yes, I don’t know… that won’t be until tomorrow, at scan time. I’m afraid you’ll have to ask someone else, or borrow a handcart,” he says absentmindedly.

“Oh yes, that’s right,” I remember, “you’re still going to Blankenloch, to see Noram in the hospital. Give him my best regards, I’ll be visiting him tomorrow too.”

"I'd be happy to. I want to see if your grandpa needs anything. I think a visit will do him good and take his mind off things a bit. I'll ask him what he knows about his

father's notes. The handwriting has piqued my curiosity, too. Maybe I can shed some light on the old notes this evening," Simon says, waving goodbye.

I watch him for a moment as he strides off towards the InterMod station. The bus to Blankenloch won't be for a while, but I suspect my father needs some peace and quiet to think things over before he runs into my grandfather. He's already disappeared behind the tall elderberry bushes that mark the edge of the campus. *›Maybe he'll go by e-bike after all? The hospital is only fifteen kilometers away...‹* I think to myself, putting my hands in my pockets.

I'm standing all alone in front of the library building. The sky is filled with many small gray clouds that keep obscuring the sun. The wind rustles the leaves of the birch and beech trees that grow all over the grounds. From here, I can see almost all the campus buildings, built around the flower meadow in the center and connected by the main alley like pearls on a string. According to the story, the campus was built on the site of a former »Agricultural Technology Center«, as the local context of a transportation hub and most of the facilities already met the actual needs.

The narrow footpath, lined with trees and bushes, which we all call the »alley«, draws me in for a short stroll. The wind is refreshingly straight, and it feels good to take a few relaxed steps. In front of the cafeteria, about a hundred meters away, on the other side of the meadow, I see some people unloading crates from cargo bikes and carrying them into the building. I can't really make them out in the shade of the trees. But it doesn't matter to me. They are the only ones still visible on the grounds and most likely belong to one of the surrounding communities that run the cafeteria kitchen.

I sit down on the old bench. The smoothly polished oak feels very pleasant and warm. *›Closing my eyes for five minutes will certainly do me good.‹*

MultiNet Library

I suspect Ajola should still be in the library. Ellucidated by the experience with Ethan's handwritten notes, it strikes me that I've never seen anything printed there. *›Strange,‹* I think, *›but also understandable; everything printed is safely stored in the dry storage room, unless it's already been recycled by the PrintBot.‹* We call it a library, but it's just a lot of monitors and not a single book directly available, certainly

not anything handwritten. *›If I absolutely needed a textbook for my studies, I had the PrintBot print it for me...‹*

The large, bright reading room is almost empty at this hour. I see Ajola in front of a dual monitor, and our teammate Reyad is sitting next to her. *›Good,‹* I think. I admire Ajola. She has an exceptional ability to learn and work across disciplines. She effortlessly integrates mechatronics, mathematics, and programming into her projects. She's also a good listener and adept at helping solve problems. I wish I could do that, too.

"Hi you two! What are you doing?" I ask, and they both look up at me in surprise.

"Hey you..." Ajola smiles at me. "Why don't you join us?" she urges me after a short pause.

Reyad casually slides his chair to the side and nods, indicating that I can sit between them. I'm grateful. My office chair just barely fits in the gap. Ajola watches me with a smile. I feel a surge of joy. *›A very pretty and unexpected smile...‹* We sit so close together that our shoulders and thighs are touching. Ajola shows me something on one of the monitors.

“We are currently working on the speed of the ScanBot’s text recognition. Reyad has written a measurement protocol that has made this extremely slow data flow more transparent for analysis,” explains Ajola.

I look into her eyes and don't understand a word.

“We looked for various places where the data flow could be slowed down or even blocked,” says Reyad, grinning. “It’s the data bus controller; it’s faulty. We just ordered a new one through MultiNet. It will be delivered to our InterMod station the day after tomorrow.”

“I think we’ve solved at least one of the ScanBot’s problems with that!” says Ajola, looking quite certain and somewhat proud.

“So you’re finished here then?” I ask, trying to distract from the fact that I don’t really have a clue what the two of them are talking about.

“Yes, it seems so, doesn’t it, Reyad?” Ajola replies.

“I think so too,” Reyad murmurs, glancing at his documents.

I don't want to know anything more about it and impatiently get up. I look at Ajola and already take a step towards the door.

“Ajola, are you coming with me? I want to get a new winter jacket; it’s getting colder soon, and my old one is worn out,” I ask. “And I don’t feel like working today.”

My voice sounds a little impatient. Reyad puts his communicator in his shoulder bag and is about to leave.

“Thank you, Reyad!” Ajola interrupts him briefly.

Reyad shrugs, waves to us, and disappears through the door. Ajola gathers her things and follows me.

"So, how was that? You write notes? On paper?" she asks, shaking her head.

I laugh.

“Yes and no. I found lots of handwritten notebooks belonging to my great-grandfather Ethan today; I've moved into Grandpa Noram's room. I've put them all in the ScanBot so they can be digitized and I can access them via the communicator.”

“Ah, I see! Then you'll probably learn something about the time before the Great Transformation and the last hundred years,” she says, seemingly lost in thought. “How is Noram?” she adds as we walk along the long, tree-lined avenue.

The question touches me. I look at Ajola, not really knowing what to say. My gaze wanders across the meadow encircled by the alley, where there aren't many flowers left at this time of year. *›Autumn is everywhere, in the meadow and in Grandpa's life…‹* I suddenly feel a chill. The sky is overcast and the wind is picking up.

“He’s deteriorating rapidly,” I reply quietly. “His illness is unfortunately progressing, and he’s glad that the medical science is leaving him alone and that, thanks to the medication he receives, he can face what’s to come without pain… that’s what he says.”

Ajola pauses briefly, her expression becoming serious. Her voice suddenly sounds sad.

"That's how I imagine the end of life too: seeing what comes next, letting go, and then..."

She doesn't say the last word. I remember that Ajola's grandfather had already said goodbye to the living a year ago. Ajola hasn't really talked about it herself yet. Certainly not with me. But it's been said that he chose to do it voluntarily. Ajola looks at me as if she expects me to say something more. But I don't want to say anything more. At least not about Noram. The subject makes me sad, and I don't want to be

sad right now.

“Yes, not an easy situation…” I say, to break the silence. “Shall we?”

Jacket from the ClothBot

We follow the narrow cobbled path to one of the side doors of the lateral wing. We have to duck under the lush elderberry bushes to get through. I open the door and let Ajola go in first. Despite the many windows, the ClothBot Passage is a relatively dark connecting space between two main buildings of the learning campus. Apart from the ClothBot, there's absolutely nothing here, not even a place to sit. I often wonder why this space was designed to be so unwelcoming. No wonder nobody wants to linger. Just in, through, and out. The only other thing I can think of that might explain the sparse furnishings is the privacy that might be needed if the bot's scanning function is ever used. Since people don't like to stay here, this is implicitly guaranteed. I don't need the scanning function right now. My clothing data is already stored in my Multi-Net, and the bot will also scan it onto the label of my old jacket and have me confirm it.

"You need a light-colored jacket; it will suit your dark skin tone and your other clothes better," I hear Ajola say. "Where's your old one?"

I pull the old jacket out of my backpack and show it to her. There's a hole in one of the sewn-on pockets.

“Okay, that one really goes no more!”, Ajola chuckles and rolls her eyes in amusement.

As always, I get the feeling she doesn't really take me seriously. I put the old jacket in the recycling chute and log into the ClothBot. A selection of stylized clothing items appears on the monitor. I tap the jacket icon and put together my new jacket from various fabric, color, and style options.

"Not so fast, Mika!" whispers Ajola, pushing me aside.

She goes into the detailed settings and tries different combinations, discards one, tries another, and finally saves three as favorites, which she proudly presents to me.

"What do you think of my selection?" she asks, grinning expectantly.

She knows a lot about clothes, I have to give her that. I'm always glad when I have

her with me when I'm choosing things.

"Yes, I like the middle one of the three best, but it should be a little longer."

With a nimble finger on the ClothBot's display, Ajola extends the virtual jacket and pulls it over my virtual avatar.

"Cool!", she laughs.

I didn't expect anything different, actually. I hug her as she stands in front of the machine, half-turned towards me and laughing contentedly.

"Thank you, it turned out really well," I whisper in her ear, and it's hard for me to let her go again.

Ajola doesn't seem to want to break away either. On the contrary, she turns to me and snuggles against my chest. I can smell her hair and her skin. I suddenly hear her giggle, and when she lifts her head, I see her eyes briefly sparkle before she turns back to the ClothBot's display.

"What are we going to do next hour?" she asks playfully, taking my hand in hers.

In the Cafeteria

"Let's get something to eat while the jacket is finished," I suggest.

She smiles at me in agreement and gently frees herself from my still-tight hug, which I reluctantly release. I watch her for a moment as she walks toward the door. Her gait is graceful and light. In the doorway, she turns around again and smiles at me before she goes out. I shake my head briefly. *›It's kind of like a dream...‹* I check that my communicator has synchronized the jacket's completion with the ClothBot and hurry. We head back to the campus cafeteria. It's already after 6 p.m., and the cafeteria is busy. A few of our mentors are sitting at a table in the corner, discussing something. Boris Aalbach waves us over.

"You've solved the problem, I hear?" he asks, clearly pleased to see Ajola.

"Yes, we've made progress, but without Reyad's help, we wouldn't have gotten to the bottom of the problem so quickly," Ajola replies.

"Were you able to order a replacement for the faulty component?"

"Yes, we were. Fortunately, there was a part in stock that could be delivered quickly."

We say our goodbyes and look for a comfortable spot at a less crowded table.

"The menu is a bit thinned out," I observe.

"The kitchen is only supplied once a day and only for an estimated number of visitors," Ajola reminds me.

"Yes, I watched today's delivery earlier when I came out of the ScanBot," I agree. "I was surprised that the crates were brought by cargo bike. Are there new gardens close enough for that to work? I remember when I helped out in the cafeteria, the vegetable deliveries were done by minibus. I helped with the unloading."

"Yes, new gardens nearby... reorganization of supplies..." Ajola murmurs, somewhat distractedly, it seems to me.

We listen to the sounds of the dining hall for a few minutes. There's no one at the wooden food counter. Behind it, two of our younger classmates, who are on kitchen duty, are making sure the food is cleanly and easily accessible, with trays, dishes, and cutlery available. The furnishings are old. The building had served as a canteen even before the Transformation, and much of it has survived to this day. Only some of the dishes needed replacing. Right now, there are only two hot dishes, but plenty of fruit and salad. I just take an apple. That's just enough for me. I know Leyla has cooked something delicious.

The low sun illuminates the room. The old laminate tables reflect the orange light onto the ceiling. The new wooden tables are matte, but the polished oak radiates a much warmer glow. All around us I see contented faces. *›Why do I always feel so good here...?‹* It's true. This is like home for me. *›Perhaps it's also because of the many wonderful hours I've spent here...?‹*

Metallic sounds can still be heard from the kitchen. It's very likely they're already cleaning. Ajola is seasoning her salad in front of me. I think she uses too many spices for my taste. I observe her movements and posture. She always sits very upright at the table and seems to be enjoying her food with all her senses.

“What will we do in three months when our time on campus ends?” she asks suddenly, leaving her fork in the salad. “I’ve been thinking about taking on some of the technical maintenance here on campus. However, there’s also an exchange program with other communities, which could lead to several projects.”

II understand Ajola's question and her thoughts perfectly. My projects here on campus are also drawing to a close, and it's time for me to reorient myself. I've also

considered spending some more time in my birthplace to make myself useful.

“I haven’t really thought about it yet,” I reply. “But I think I should check out what other opportunities the TransSocietyBoard offers on MultiNet soon. A change of scenery would do me good and help quench my thirst for experience.”

“Yes, that requires good preparation,” says Ajola, glancing at her communicator’s clock. “I really don’t know how it’s going to be. But your jacket is ready for pickup!” she states, starting to get up even though she hasn’t quite finished eating.

“And your food? Are you going to leave everything like that?” I ask, somewhat taken aback, as the alarm on my communicator also goes off.

I'm just now realizing how quickly time flies. Ajola is already standing in front of me, takes my hand, and her eyes urge me to follow her. I don't want to argue with her at this moment. I sling my backpack over my shoulder, and we hand our used trays to the dish return station. A reflected ray of sunlight briefly dazzles me at the door. Ajola looks up at the sky and smiles at me. A pleasant warmth spreads through my chest.
›What could that be...?‹

We walk slowly, without any hurry, along the main alley. The setting sun casts our shadows across the meadow, reaching the entrance to the ClothBot Passage long before we do. I feel no need to say anything. I glance sideways at her face. She's looking ahead, thoughtfully, I suspect. She holds my hand firmly in hers, and it feels very comfortable.

The old buildings housing the chemistry and physics labs slowly come into view behind the ancient trees. Because of their stucco work, the students affectionately call them »Grandma and Grandpa«. The ClothBot passage, built between them with its stark, functional architecture, initially appears somewhat out of place, but it has long since been fully integrated. The ClothBot itself is located in special rooms added to the rear of the passage. The passage itself contains only the bot's terminal, the input and output hatch, and the small niche for the scanner.

Once I arrive, I log back into the ClothBot terminal. The dispensing hatch opens and my new winter jacket is ready for collection.

"Come on, put it on!" demands Ajola.

I slip on my jacket and look in the mirror on the side of the machine.

"It fits perfectly!" I exclaim happily.

"Great, fantastic color, but overall a bit too long."

Our eyes meet, and a warm feeling spreads uncontrollably through me. I like Ajola, and I somehow get the impression that she's very aware of it. However, I don't know if I should be happy about it right now. *›I'm facing a decision that might take me far away from her,‹* I think involuntarily, *›Is this the right time to fall in love with her?...‹* But what I feel inside doesn't speak the language of reason. *›...do I even have a choice not to fall in love right now? I think I don't even want to know!‹*

"You shouldn't laugh about it," I admonish her slyly, "after all, you chose the colors and the model, not me! And the length is just right."

I'm well aware that my eyes tell a different story to her, and that she'd rather hear their story than my words. But I don't care.

A Change is on the Horizon

Harvest Preparations

"The weather forecast says that next week will be perfect harvest weather. But we'll need a few harvest helpers to bring in the picked grain," Leyla announces from her study.

Through the open door, I can only see her back. Lares is sitting at the kitchen table and seems to be really enjoying his meal. I'm always amazed at how my brother can forget everything around him when he's eating.

“Hey, Mika! What are you doing next week? You're quite skilled with the pick-thresher!” I hear Leyla ask suddenly.

›Driving the pickthresher,‹ I think, *›yes, I enjoy using the machine's power so precisely that it makes almost no noise.‹* It's quite a challenge to maneuver the spider-like harvester so gently across the meadows that the plants are disturbed as little as possible. I realize I'm really looking forward to it.

"I'm in, and you, Lares? You don't exactly have a green thumb..."

"Lares already has other plans," Leyla knows.

Lares chokes on his food, wants to protest, but his protest is stifled by a coughing fit.

“Lares is helping me with the sewer renovation in the settlement; the rainwater collector is leaking and needs to be renewed or repaired,” says Simon.

Our community distributes the upcoming tasks among all residents who can help. To be precise, my mother coordinates the task allocation. She's been organizing things for the community for two years. I think she's doing a better job than my father did, and she knows how to represent her function convincingly, which certainly isn't easy when so many people need to be involved spontaneously and for short periods.

The management program, which is installed by default on all communicators, is clearly a great help to her. Nevertheless, she first has to gather all the necessary tasks, identify the required work, and create a draft priority list for the planning meeting, which can then be discussed and agreed upon with everyone. But that's precisely what my mother obviously enjoys most. The subsequent organization of the

work runs almost automatically via the app in the communicator, after everyone involved has indicated their availability according to their skills.

“Before the harvest,” I add, “I’d like to take a closer look at the pickthresher, so we can work without interruption and not spend more time fixing things than harvesting like last year!”

“That’s a good idea,” says Lares, his face still red from his coughing fit. “I’ll help you with that.”

“I can see you guys are on it! I’ll ask a few more people who can help us out,” Leyla’s voice booms from the study.

Simon comes out of the bathroom and gives me a quick nod. He fills the kettle with water, switches it on, and gazes absently out the window. Leyla also comes into the kitchen, carrying a notepad. She looks at Simon questioningly.

“And?…”, she says, apparently waiting for an answer to a question unknown to me.

Simon turns to her and says in a dry voice:

"Nothing, at least not yet..."

Lares looks at me, confused. I don't know what this is about either. My mother looks at her notes and then puts them on the table.

"They can't be serious, can they?" she sais, sitting down on one of the kitchen chairs. "Don't they know we've been expecting this since yesterday?"

"Yes, but some haven't managed it yet," Simon replies calmly. "They all want everything collected and reported by the next meeting next week at the latest."

"And how am I supposed to finish the planning if I lack the current demand data? Do they all think the weather will wait for us until we know what we actually need?"

My mother's voice also sounds calm, but more like the calm before the storm. I'm beginning to understand the situation. As far as I know the planning process, all families, indeed, all members of the community, have to estimate their actual food needs for the next planning period so that the harvesting can be organized effectively. This means organizing it in such a way that the lives of other beings are not affected more than absolutely necessary. *›Apparently, there are some people who are late again...‹*

“I’m afraid I’ll have to call a special meeting…” Leyla begins, her face grave.

“Are you sure you want to create this kind of tension?” Simon interrupts. “You al-

ready have the statistics from the last few years, and those should be enough for a rough plan.”

“Yes, they’re sufficient for a rough plan, but we all know that such planning can potentially do more harm than good,” Leyla insists. “We need to talk to everyone! Everyone needs to understand that if they let themselves go like this, it could have consequences none of us want…”

“Yes, okay. The planning is your responsibility, and things aren’t going as agreed. Perhaps a special meeting wouldn’t be a bad idea,” Simon admits, pouring the boiling water into the teapot.

My mother's face is tense. She says nothing more, but simply gets up and disappears into her study. Shortly after, I hear her talking quietly on the phone. Lares looks at me questioningly. I shrug. Simon is still standing by the window with his teacup, gazing out absently.

My communicator beeps. A special meeting of the community has been called. *›That was quick...‹* The situation seems to be under control at the moment. I look questioningly at my father. I'm preoccupied with something else right now.

"You were still visiting Grandpa, weren't you? How is he?"

"He's doing better at the moment, but I think he's steadily declining," Simon replies thoughtfully. "He did have some interesting things to say about Ethan's notebooks, though. He still remembers many of the things his father wrote down during the metamorphosis. I think just mentioning the notebooks really moved him. He had experienced some of those times himself and believes we have it much easier today than back then. He says we should be grateful that people have come to their senses and now coexist peacefully for the most part."

What my father tells me only makes me more curious. *›It's about time I had access to the notebooks on the MultiNet. I need some answers to the mountain of questions that's piling up.‹*

"I'd like to ask Grandpa a few questions about the notebooks tomorrow when I visit. Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I think Grandpa will be happy to answer your questions, Mika, but if you see that it's causing him too much stress, please be considerate, okay?" Father cautions.

"Yes, of course..."

I realize I'm worried about my grandfather. Overall, I'm feeling quite restless. Noram's health is giving me a stomachache, the conversation I had with Ajola about the near future is just as vivid, and then there's my curiosity about the notebooks. I feel like it's all connected somehow. Perhaps because my great-grandfather's notes obviously come from a turbulent time, a time when all of humanity had to embark on a journey, the outcome of which I'm now witnessing.

“Oh, by the way, I’m thinking about finally fulfilling my wish for a long trip and connecting with other people after my time on campus…” I blurt out.

“Do you already have a specific destination in mind?” Leyla asks, as if she’s been waiting for this. “What do you think about visiting our family in Burkina Faso?”

“I hadn’t even thought of that,” I say, a little surprised, and look at my mother curiously. “That’s right, I’d love to meet Grandpa Jitu and Grandma Kyara in person. You’ve told me a lot about them, but so far we’ve only seen each other on the screen during video calls.”

“There’s that field irrigation project near where they live,” Simon adds casually, as if he’s just been waiting for the chance to mention it. “You should take a closer look at it on the TransSocietyBoard. But it’s a long way and a difficult journey to Burkina Faso…” he warns, looking directly at me.

“That wouldn’t stop me, even though I didn’t really want to travel that far right away,” I reply, a little annoyed that my parents already have plans for me. “I do want to see Grandma and Grandpa and Burkina Faso, but I wanted to start with a shorter route, for example, to the Black Sea coast, through Eastern Europe. I didn’t want to be away from home for so long, you know?” I add, aware that my voice sounds a bit defiant.

Simon and Leyla glance at each other briefly and then pretend not to have noticed my somewhat annoyed tone.

“Of course, Mika, it’s entirely your decision whether and where you’ll travel…” Leyla begins after a short pause. “I’m only bringing this up because my parents have long expressed a desire to meet you in person… and, since they’re not so young anymore to undertake such a long journey themselves, it’s only natural that they’d like you to come and visit them there in Koti.”

Leyla looks at me calmly. Simon, on the other hand, seems more interested in a soup spoon. *›They seem to have been talking about this for a long time...‹*

"So you've already talked to Grandpa and Grandma about me going there?" I ask my mother directly.

"Yes, we talked about it, but that..."

"Couldn't you have talked to me first? Asked me what I was planning?" I point out.

"Mika, why are you getting so upset? We only talked in principle about the fact that you'll definitely travel to Burkina Faso sometime to meet our family there. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Yes, of course, but now they're waiting for me and I can't even decide anymore... because if I don't go, I'll disappoint them before they've even had a chance to meet me in person..."

I'm very upset and angry right now and can't even look my parents in the eye. It's not that I'm not tempted to take such a long trip. It's just that I feel somewhat patronized by my parents.

“I wanted to decide for myself where I travel,” I add, this time seeking eye contact.

Simon raises his head and meets my gaze. Leyla stands up and takes a step towards me. Simon holds her firmly and speaks in a very serious voice.

"Mika, you are still the one who can and even must make the actual decision. We can only offer suggestions that may or may not inspire your considerations. Ultimately, you will be the one on the journey, not us. And, by the way, you've never actually talked to us about your travel plans before... which is normal at your age," he adds with a smile.

›Aha, that old trick again...‹ a thought trickles in, and I have to chuckle at myself. My father has his ways, which I've never really been able to resist.

"What other plans did you have exactly, Mika?" Leyla asks, sitting back down.

›That's when she got me...‹

“That’s not the point…” I try to deflect.

“Yes, that’s true,” she persists, “but if you’re making such a fuss, then the question is justified, and I’m genuinely curious.”

“It doesn’t matter now!” I retort. “As I mentioned, I’m really keen to visit Grandma and Grandpa… but I’m a bit surprised by the conversations we’ve already had and the expectations that have undoubtedly arisen.”

I feel myself calming down. Simon smiles at me, and Leyla's gaze practically en-

velops me. I'm glad none of my friends can see me right now. It would be a bit embarrassing. *›Such family drama...‹* I think, and I immediately regret it. Actually, I'm glad Leyla and Simon are the way they are. *›But I can't tell them that, can I?‹* I pull myself together and ask again.

"Why are you warning me about the long journey, Dad? Did you have concerns about the distance? Obviously, you both seem to have expected that I would soon be leaving home, and even that this journey would be very long..."

"No, no, no concerns. Of course, we've been expecting you to leave home soon. Most young people do that at some point, often right after turning eighteen. That's how we met, too..." he smiles at Leyla. "I just mean that you've never taken such a long trip before," he continues with a chuckle. "At your age, though, it's a worthwhile experience that I can only recommend."

"I know that, and I also know that you've already taken a trip like this before, and, as I can see, you came back safe and sound," I fib, looking deep into my father's eyes.

My father had taken the trip with my mother to ask her parents for her hand in marriage. They had told us about it several times, but until now the whole story seemed rather insignificant to me. Especially since the supposed reason for the trip didn't really seem credible.

"If I decide to do this, then you absolutely must help me with the preparations," I look directly at my father again. "Because I have no idea yet how I could get there."

I'm already noticing that, despite the somewhat surprising turn of events caused by my travel decision, the idea is gripping me, and a deep, unfamiliar longing is taking shape within me. In my mind's eye, I can already see landscapes I've only ever seen in documentaries. I want to travel, and I'm incredibly curious about new experiences. I just don't know yet if it has to be so far away. I'm also a little bit afraid of it. Or maybe it's just the excitement?

New Room

›Where am I?‹ Everything around me is somehow different than I expected. I can't see very clearly yet; my eyes are still asleep. *›Oh, right, I've moved... the room is new...‹* The door is only ajar, and there's a loud clattering coming from the kitchen. I

can only assume Lares is making breakfast. I don't feel like getting up yet.

“Hey you!”, I hear my voice saying quietly.

The clinking stops and Lares looks through the door opening.

"Are you awake already?"

He's holding a breakfast plate and disappears again immediately. *›That guy is always eating, isn't he?‹* I tell myself, trying to sit up on the edge of the bed.

"So, Mika, did you sleep well in your new room?" I hear Lare's voice from somewhere in the kitchen.

"Yeah, I was a bit confused when I woke up because I didn't immediately know where I was..." says an even quieter voice.

Lares looks at me again through the crack in the door, questioningly.

“What do you say?”

I clear my throat and wave him off. Lares smiles and disappears again. I stand up, but my feet are still very clumsy and I stumble over my slippers. *›Ah yes, a good start...‹* Lares looks at me with his mouth full and remains silent. I need some tea. I put the kettle on again and go to the open kitchen window. The blackbirds in the neighborhood are loudly marking their territory. The air is fresh and smells of ripe fruit. I'm slowly coming back to the present moment. I hear my communicator buzzing softly in my room. I get it into the kitchen. The ScanBot is finished. All the notebooks are now in my MultiNet. *›Finally, about time!‹* The water is boiling. I set an alarm for the tea. It still needs to steep. I look out the window at the garden. I have the feeling that everything is moving very slowly. Lares is unusually quiet right now, I think. I browse through the new table of contents and the scanner logs. Everything seems to have worked without a hitch. *›Good!‹* I sit down at the kitchen table, take a sip of tea, and open the first entry.

> *March 18, 2009*
>
> *Adina was in my seminar today! I had no idea she also specializes in sociology. I thought she was studying business administration… do they have social studies in business administration? I absolutely have to find out. It would be fantastic if we also had some common interests. Maybe she'd like to contribute to our newsletter. Maybe*

she'll even come to the demonstration? Anyway, I have to say that Professor Welzer didn't stand a chance against her – ever since I saw her, I haven't been able to understand a single word he was saying about his FUTUR ZWEI project. And that's not good at all – if I don't pass his course, things are looking grim. Adina was certainly a sight for sore eyes compared to old Harry, there's no denying that.

›Business administration?‹ The communicator explains that business administration was a sub-discipline within economics, dealing with the management of businesses. *›OK? But what exactly are businesses?‹* A business was an economically independent organizational unit that, with the help of planning and decision-making tools, took on market and capital risks and utilized one or more establishments to pursue its corporate purpose and goals. *›Aha!‹* And FUTUR ZWEI was a non-profit foundation dedicated to the project of a sustainable, future-proof, and open society. *›Well, that remains interesting and raises more questions than it can answer...‹*

I enter Burkina Faso in the notebook search index; let's see what Great-Grandpa had to write about it. Many entries are displayed.

April 22, 2009

I am appalled… I just saw Miki Mistrati's film about the child slaves on the cocoa plantations in Ivory Coast. I'm speechless. It's 2009, a year after the Harkin-Engel Protocol, which these assholes themselves negotiated and signed, came into effect, and then these images, this overwhelming evidence. It's clear that the powerful Nestlé, Cargill, and Co. simply don't care how the cocoa beans are harvested, as long as the price is right and they can make their profit.

I'm simply speechless and saddened. What kind of people must we be, living here in the West, if we still indulge in cheap chocolate produced by these monstrous corporations despite this evidence? Children as young as seven have worked for free to make these ridiculously low prices possible.

I don't want to eat chocolate anymore! How can I be sure that the cocoa beans were harvested without child labor? And I won't give chocolate as a gift anymore either!

It's crazy – I don't even know right now which information is truly important and which isn't. Child abuse, if it's reported at all, is only reported by activists, while international organizations currently consider it far more important that the »swine flu« is declared a »pandemic«. Not that such an epidemic isn't dangerous, but a »pandemic« is something else entirely, in my opinion. I admit, I can't help but suspect ulterior motives behind this.

›And what does that have to do with Burkina Faso? Was that about child labor in Burkina Faso? Do cocoa beans grow there?‹ The search algorithm simply flagged everything related to Africa. I put the mug on the table and lean back. I find the last statements a bit shocking. Not that I eat much chocolate. I can hardly remember the last time I ate chocolate. But I don't feel like I miss it either. *›We have honey and such delicious jams here...‹* But apparently, a lot of chocolate was eaten back then, and we learned in chemistry class that sugar production is a complex process with a serious environmental impact. Today, chocolate is made only from cocoa beans, and jams and fruit spreads, if necessary at all, are cooked with apple pectin. All without any refined sugar. *›Well, I suppose times were different back then...‹*

May 1, 2009

What a day! Seriously! Why don't these Antifa people understand that violence can only ever bring about more violence? Why all the riots against the police, why dressing in black, masking themselves, and setting cars on fire, no matter how expensive they are? Don't they realize how much damage they're doing to the very ideology they claim they have to »fight for«? May 1st, Labor Day, should be a day of joy and reflection, not of fighting against each other!

Never mind, I can't change these people. I have to accept that they too are trying to change the system and that the riots are their »voice«. It's a shame they themselves aren't aware of the consequences.

On a positive note: I met a young African man at the demonstration today who apparently studies at the university here, or something like that – I didn't quite understand what he said because of all the

noise around us. He was carrying a homemade sign: »NO slavery for chocolate!« His name is Zanga Kaboré, as he wrote on a piece of paper for me, and he comes from Burkina Faso. We talked about the film »Dirty Chocolate« by Miki Mistrati. He thinks that this film doesn't really depict the conditions there. Unfortunately, we got lost in the crowd when the Antifa started rioting and the police had to intervene. Zanga is an interesting person.

Adina war leider nicht dabei :-(Ich habe sie gesucht, sie war aber nicht zu finden. Ans Telefon ging sie auch nicht.

I put the communicator away and look outside. The beech leaves are moving in the gentle morning breeze. Lares notices me looking outside and does the same.

"Is something wrong?" he says, and puts a piece of bread with butter into his mouth.

I don't answer him. The note about our other, African great-grandfather caught me off guard. Something stirred within me when I read the name Kaboré. It's also my grandfather's name. I'm half Kaboré, too. So is Lares. *›I wonder if Lares is aware that we have roots on another continent?‹* I'm not entirely sure if any of this means anything to him. In any case, he's never mentioned it before. He keeps eating as if he'll never get another bite.

I get up and pour myself another cup of tea. With my communicator next to the plate, I spread onion lard on a slice of crispbread and continue reading.

October 10, 2013

How can this be? It's reported that in Bangladesh, 10 percent of all children between the ages of 5 and 14 have to work; otherwise, their families wouldn't be able to feed them or themselves. I mean, Noram is two and a half years old now—that would mean that if we lived in one of the poorer areas of Bangladesh, he'd be working in three years! Could I allow that? Would I even have a chance of preventing it? I look at the little guy, happy and content and, most importantly, FED, turning everything upside down here in the apartment, despite Adina's »authoritarian regime«, and I can't imagine what it must be like if we were in such a situation. Just trying to imagine what goes

through the minds of parents in Bangladesh when they have to send their children to work makes me shudder.

I'm currently unemployed, as they say, and yet I'm not worried about not being able to feed my child. And the worst part is that I'm becoming increasingly aware that my carefree attitude is financed by the misery of these people. Something has to happen so that this doesn't have to continue. Something has to change, and I, as a trained sociologist, should know what... should I? The truth is, I can easily imagine how things should be. It's just that the path there isn't clear to me... not yet. And the fact that this path is actually known to those who, as Snowden has just shown us all, are resisting it with all available power, doesn't exactly make implementation any easier. I also have serious doubts as to whether the Occupy movement, which has been in the mainstream news for two years now, represents a genuinely useful approach to change. My feeling is that this resistance only generates more counter-resistance, or rather, further restrictions and control. I haven't been able to perceive any improvement so far.

It's uncomfortable to think about – I feel quite powerless.

Yes, of course, the story of my mother and her parents probably goes back to the time of my great-grandfather and Zanga. Yes, of course, and then what? I'd like to continue reading, but that definitely requires much more time and concentration than I can muster right now. Lares has finished his breakfast and is obviously about to leave the house. I'm still chewing on my crispbread.

"Lares, shall we go and check on the pickthresher this afternoon?" I ask, trying to buy some time.

"Sure, I'll be at the equipment shed around two," replies Lares, who's already about to leave. "We'll get it running! Bye, see you later, Mika!" is all I hear.

"Yeah, see you later," I call after him in a half-hearted voice.

›He's always in such a hurry.‹ I'd rather just get back into bed. However, that's not an option.

I gather my things and head outside. On the way to the InterMod station, I log my trip to »Blankenloch«. I'm in luck. The next connection in my direction leaves in about fifteen minutes. Good, I can browse through Ethan's notebooks a bit longer. I'll

search the archive for entries that mention Noram's name. *›Since I'm going to see him anyway...‹* The search takes a while and returns a rather long list. *›Oh, you... what did I expect? Of course, the father writes about his son more than once.‹* I simply click on one of the first references listed.

> *February 23, 2017*
>
> *I am very glad that we live in Europe and not somewhere in Asia. And that I don't have to worry that my children will one day be forced by hunger to work in one of the factories of H&M or Primark. Noram is a boy, but that makes no difference to me. Child labor should not exist. Children should only work if they enjoy it themselves, as a form of play and learning.*
>
> *When I read what the European textile industry does for profit, and what we Europeans put up with for a cheap price, I'm ashamed that I was ever happy when I bought a dirt-cheap T-shirt.*
>
> *Noram will soon be six and will need all sorts of things for school. It's a good thing Adina and I agreed not to buy cheap things from those textile companies.*
>
> *Zanga doesn't have this problem in Burkina Faso – I wonder if the things we sent him for Jitu arrived at him and his children? In what is currently, from a German perspective, a permanent »refugee crisis«, our help, as Zanga always emphasizes, is very welcome. Should that make me feel good? I don't know. Especially not now, when a person has been elected president in the USA who wants to »deport« all »illegal migrants« from the country. I really didn't think the Americans were capable of this... but, it seems, nothing is impossible these days!*

It's strange to read about my terminally ill grandfather as a small child. However, it is my family's story. *›They haven't just found each other in the meantime, no, Grandpa has now been in the world for six years!‹*

I sit in the very back of the InterMod bus. All the seats are taken, as expected. The world outside lies peaceful in the morning air. People are beginning their day's work. It's busy at this early hour, and I usually find watching people going about their

activities fascinating. But now I'm preoccupied with a different world. A world that ceased to exist long before I was born.

Visiting Grandpa in the Hospital

Grandpa Noram's room is bathed in sunlight. Grandpa sits in an old wingback chair that looks almost exactly like the one in my new room at home. He doesn't notice that I'm already standing next to him. His face radiates calm, and his eyes gaze somewhere into the distance. I gently tap him on the shoulder.

"Hello Grandpa! How are you today?"

Grandpa flinches slightly, but without being startled, and is delighted. He laughs and beams as if he has witnessed a miracle. His gaze encompasses me, and I feel very clearly the warmth of the connection that has always existed between us.

"It's so nice that you're here, Mika! You've moved into my old room now? How do you like it?"

"I'm so happy to have so much more space now. But I still need to get used to the new surroundings. This morning when I woke up, everything seemed a bit strange."

"That will change, my dear Mika!" Grandpa assures me. "In a few days, you'll have settled in, and it will seem as if it's always been your room."

I sit on the edge of the bed. Grandpa gets up and goes to the open window.

“Yes, I think so too,” I whisper. “But how are you? Do you have everything you need here? I haven’t seen anyone in the building. Who will help you if you need anything?”

Grandpa Noram is standing in front of the window and doesn't seem to have heard anything. I go to him and ask again.

"Grandpa? Are you alright?"

Grandpa turns to me as if he were seeing me for the first time.

"Did you say something?" he asks. "Have you been here long?"

I have a sinking feeling in my stomach. I hadn't expected Grandpa to be so distant already. He seems to be drifting away from immediate reality and living in his own world. This confuses me, and I don't know how to deal with it.

“Do you still remember your father, my great-grandfather Ethan?” I try a different approach.

“My father? What makes you say that?”

He seems to remember something, and in his eyes, bright lights flicker briefly, reminiscent of a vision from long ago. He looks at me and places his hand on my shoulder. His hand is incredibly light and warm. I venture a direct statement:

"I found Great-Grandpa Ethan's many notebooks in your bookcase, and you know what? I scanned them all last night and can now access them anytime on my Multi-Net."

"Ah yes, that was a good idea. I've had them for years, but I hadn't really managed to read much of them until now. My father gave them to me, but that was a long time ago. You know, he wasn't home much when I was little. He was always busy with his work and his activism for a better world. Until the beginning of the crisis that then initiated the Transformation, we practically didn't know each other..."

Grandpa coughs softly and clears his throat. His eyes seem to gaze deep into his memories. Suddenly, his voice becomes stronger.

"It was only in times of hardship that we truly got to know each other. I was already in my early twenties and studying at the Technical University in Darmstadt. In the time that followed, we both, along with my mother, often had to search together for solutions to survive. But even during this very turbulent period, he could talk to anyone better and more easily than to me. Strange that I'm saying that now, isn't it? We could always communicate with just a few words. We were, so to speak, on the same wavelength. But he very rarely had anything personal to say to me. He hugged me very often. Without saying a word, but with shining eyes. My mother told me back then that he simply didn't know what to say to me, since everything between us was already clear... but it wasn't, never was... I had to guess a lot. But I never asked him about it myself, confronted him, or sought a conversation. Luckily, I was always very good at understanding his intentions. When he was the same age as I am now, he gave me his notebooks and told me that he wrote them for me… I think that was his attempt at making amends, because he had let me participate so little in his inner life. He said at the time…

Grandpa's words cease and his gaze stares into the void, as if he were watching a film that is only playing in his head.

"What did he mean, Grandpa? Do you remember?"

"What?" he shudders, as if jolted from a dream. "Who do you mean, Mika?"

"Your father. You said he said something to you back then, but you didn't finish your sentence."

"Oh yes, my father... he told me I should be very proud of myself. Because what we achieved together was almost a miracle. And that many people had to make great sacrifices for it. But I also think he meant himself in my youth, because I witnessed and helped shape that metamorphosis... I'm really not sure what he meant..."

His eyes moisten and he leans heavily on my shoulder.

"Back then, I didn't think his notebooks were important enough to read. Then one day he was gone and I didn't dare touch them anymore... I was afraid that what I would read might hurt me..."

He takes my arm and pulls me towards him. His embrace says more than he could probably say to me.

"Oh Mika, if I could relive those times... I would have the courage today to initiate a conversation with him. Can you understand what I mean?"

I'm speechless, and even his hug is a bit too much. I gently push him aside and sit back down on the bed. He looks at me as if he wants to say something more, but he hesitates. For a few moments, there's silence in the room. A silence that connects us, a silence that comforts us both. I get up again and take him in my arms.

"What do you think about me copying all the notebooks to your MultiNet, then you can browse through them anytime with your communicator!"

Noram tries to suppress his tears and sobs.

"Thank you, that would be a very good idea! And it would shorten my wait here..."

He is slowly regaining his inner peace.

"I was just reading an entry from 2017 during the drive; you were six years old then!"

"Yes, I can still remember parts of that time. As I said, my childhood was peaceful, unlike in other parts of the world. And Adina and Ethan were loving parents who knew how to care not only for me, but for all of our futures. In my opinion, though, they cared a little too much for everyone's future and not enough for mine. Later, I was able to, and indeed had to, participate in everything that needed to be changed

and developed. That's when my misunderstanding disappeared. I became one of the many who cared about the bigger picture, the progress of humanity. We put many things aside for everyone back then. Your grandmother could have told you a lot about it if she had lived to see you. They were turbulent times, back when I also ventured out into the world."

Grandpa smiles and his eyes gaze at something that only he can see.

"What was my grandmother really like? I know very little about her. Neither you nor my parents talked much about her. She had already passed away several years before I was born."

"Rachida, your grandmother, was a special person. She died in an accident while we were traveling together in the Arabian Desert. We often went hiking in the Libyan desert with the Bedouin tribes back then. She was caught in a sandstorm and buried. We searched for her for almost a week before we finally found her."

Grandpa's eyes well up again as he seems to be gazing at Rachida's face in his mind. I, on the other hand, feel nothing. I never had the chance to meet her.

"Did you miss her? Sorry, that's a silly question..."

"No, no, I understand you're asking. Yes! Very much so. We were perfect for each other. Ever since we met, we'd never been apart for more than a few days. The day she was caught in the storm, she wanted to go alone to find a spring that, according to stories, was nearby. The weather was fine. We'd pitched our camp next to some rocks, and none of our experienced companions saw the storm coming. It came out of nowhere. Searching in the storm was pointless. We would have perished ourselves. Rachida knew the desert well. We all hoped she would find suitable shelter. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. It all seems so long ago now, but it feels like yesterday to me... yes, to answer your question, it still hurts that she's no longer with me."

I don't know what to say. So I remain silent and press my hand to his shoulder. Grandpa Noram isn't crying, but I can feel the deep sadness in his heart so clearly that it brings tears to my eyes.

"But son, let's not talk about those old, sad things anymore, which we can't change anyway. Just one more thing. You didn't know her, your Grandma Rachida, but I'm sure you would have liked each other very much. You have something of hers, namely this curiosity about everything that is and lives. She passed that on to you, I

can see it in you."

The mood brightens again. Grandpa smiles at me, and this time I'm sure he's looking at me, not just his memories. My heart feels warm, yet somehow I'm uneasy. As if I know something might happen that I can't really control.

Repairs in the Equipment Shed

I get off the InterMod in Walzbachtal and watch the small bus thoughtfully as it drives away. After a few moments, it disappears around the first bend. The connecting road runs along a small rise at this place. From here, I have a good view of our community settlement. I can even see the roof of the equipment shed at the far end of the settlement, and our little house a bit further to the right, at the edge of the woods. In front of it are some of the other houses and the community center, which housed the original community during the time of Transformation, the meeting place, and then the remaining houses. In total, I can see about forty of the fifty-three small houses from here, arranged in an almost circular pattern around the large linden tree in the center of the settlement. The closest house is where Ajola and her parents live. I can just see her mother in the garden, in front of her easel. *›What is she imagining now?‹* I wonder reflexively. Ajola's mother is a gifted painter, many say. Her paintings tell fantastical stories and fairy tales populated by mythical creatures. Almost everyone in our community has such a picture in their living room. *›Luckily, we don't...‹* I chuckle.

I set off, following the narrow forest path we all use as a shortcut from the InterMod station to the settlement's meeting point. It's early afternoon, and I can hear a few people chatting, presumably while working in the permaculture garden. I can't understand what they're saying. They're still too far away, and their voices are muffled by the thicket between them. But there are definitely more than just these two people. Ahead of me is the small wooden bridge that »Old Hans« built over the little stream. I don't know why Hans got the »old« moniker, since he's actually the same age as Simon. The stream is full of water and rushes merrily over the rounded stones. I think I can even see some small fish.

The path leads into a side alley between the houses, which goes directly to the meeting place. *›Ah, they're already working on it...‹* I think to myself as I see several people renewing the paving. When I walked by this morning, they hadn't started yet. The disadvantage, if you want to look at it that way, of the intentionally permeable paving

in our alleys is that it needs to be renewed every now and then. With use, the loosely laid flat stones shift, and puddles and mud can form between them. Markus, Paul, and Ibrahim are now working on improving this.

"So, hard at work today?" I tease them briefly as I walk past.

They're working very intently, so I just want to say a quick hello. Besides, Lares is probably already waiting for me, knowing him. The three of them glance up briefly, and I hear Paul call after me.

“Yes, yes, some people have it good, don’t they? And you, just going for a walk today?”

“Wouldn’t you rather help out?” Ibrahim adds.

I hear them whispering to each other, and then their laughter echoes through the alley.

“Of course, I’ve certainly earned this today… and besides, I have other plans!” I call back over my shoulder and hurry on.

I know they don't mean it. We all have tasks to do, for which we volunteer and which are agreed upon and planned collectively. I'm very familiar with this now, because my mother places great importance on transparency in her work.

I cross the assembly square and walk past Benny and Maria's newly renovated house, which isn't quite finished yet. They started it in the spring, and we all helped. The roof is already repaired, the solar panels are installed, and the house has been plastered with new clay. Benny and Maria are now working on the interior. Everyone has their own ideas. We're all curious to see what the finished interior will look like when we visit them for the housewarming party.

›I'll be there in a minute...‹ I think to myself as I walk past our house. I notice that my bedroom window is open. 'Never mind, it won't rain...' The equipment shed, actually a large, white-painted barn, stands out clearly against the dark green backdrop of the forest. The tractor is still parked in front of it. *›Why is it still outside?‹* I wonder, and open the narrow access door set into the large barn door. Lares is already inside, fiddling with a wrench in the innards of the pickthresher. He's obviously also enlisted Max as a helper, who's currently trying to clean some parts with a rag.

"Hello guys!" I greet as I walk in, and then say to Lares, "Grandpa sends you his love. I just got back from him. He says he's doing well, but I'm worried about him."

I hang my jacket on a rusty hook in the wall and try to get an overview first.

"Yes, thank you!" Lares huffs. "That doesn't surprise me. Grandpa Noram would never admit he's not feeling well, would he?" he says, lifting his head over the edge of the machine.

I can see in his eyes that he's worried too.

“Anyway,” he continues, “we already took the picking beam apart. But we couldn’t find anything unusual.”

Max has finished cleaning the parts and is now screwing them back together. As far as I can tell, everything is in its place, just as I was taught.

"I think we should take a look at the hydraulic cylinder, which controls the threshing process. I remember that last late summer the picking beam often stopped working and we had to keep refilling the oil."

Lares looks at me in disbelief, but bends down, opens the hydraulic oil container and peers inside.

“There’s our problem, we’re low on hydraulic oil!” he announces.

“And why didn’t you say so right away? And why is the oil missing? There must be a leak somewhere, right? But we haven’t found anything yet. Or maybe, like last year, we just looked in the wrong place! And if the hydraulic reservoir hadn’t been so dirty, we probably would have noticed the oil shortage sooner…” Max laughs.

He wipes the hydraulic tank clean with an old rag, and the readable scale that shows the fill level becomes visible again.

"The symptom is gone, but we haven't solved the problem yet," I whisper without looking at them. "Let's do a test run first and see if any oil is leaking. I don't like this at all."

"Good idea, then start the thing up," Lares says, carefully stepping back.

I climb into the driver's cab of the vehicle. The battery and the charge level of the accumulators look good. I switch it on. The machine starts. I move the lever for the picking bar. *›Running like a dream!‹* I think. *›That sound of the threshing slats is almost music to my ears.‹*

"Everything's working as expected. Nothing should stand in the way of next week's wheat harvest now," Max rubbes his hands together.

"No, no, the way we've fixed it, we're no further along than last year," I reply, still

gleeful. "I'll let it run and we'll take a good look at all the hydraulic connections together. Now that everything's clean, we should be able to see if there's a leak somewhere. Come on, let's go down there!"

We all crawl under the moving picking beams when Lares' voice rings out:

"I've got it! Here's the leak, at the return connection to the tank! Definitely!"

We gather around Lares and watch as a fine trail of oil makes its way along the now clean side of the tank.

"Either it's not tightened properly, or the check valve seal is shot," Max diagnosed in a serious voice. "Let me get the wrench. It's a fifteen milimeter, isn't it?"

A few turns with the wrench and the leak at the clamp is fixed. I stop the engine. Lares and Max are beaming from ear to ear and are cleaning their hands with the now rather worn rag. I grin to myself. *›Like little boys...‹*

"So, are we finally finished now? Can I leave?" I ask rhetorically, gathering my things. They both smile and wave unmistakably that I'm no longer needed.

I say a quick goodbye and check when I can catch the InterMod bus back to campus. Boris Aalbach seems to be on campus and holding office hours. The InterMod bus is scheduled to run again in an hour, so I should be able to make it to his office hours. *›Until then, I have time to read a bit...‹*

I sit down on the wooden bench in the bus shelter, in the shade. I feel the need to pause for a moment. The connecting road resembles a green tunnel, flooded with sunlight. The road surface appears velvety, its edges gradually disappearing into the verdant forest floor. Blades of grass have grown everywhere between the perforated paving stones. Only the lanes remain somewhat clear. The InterMod bus runs even on very busy days, a maximum of four or five times a day. But on most days, it only runs once or twice. Sometimes not at all. The rest of the time, the road is empty and quiet, like now.

A light breeze is blowing, and the only sounds are birdsong. I feel tense and excited, and this quiet is good for me. There's a brief rustling to my right. A squirrel watches me for a moment. In the distance, I think I see a deer crossing the road. That rarely happens. They're so shy, and the areas untouched by roads are very large.

I'm looking for information about agriculture during my great-grandfather's time.

November 8, 2023

I am currently reading an exciting article summary, I think from »Oya«, which Adina forwarded to me today.

Nature shows us the way, constantly producing new, fruit-bearing plants in diverse mixed cultures. What we humans have cultivated in the past and continue to cultivate today, however, are single-crop annuals. We have now corrected this fundamental error and instead harvest our wheat, rye, soy, and corn repeatedly from the stalk or cob, just as if they were apples, olives, or nuts. The grain then simply regrows, doesn't need to be re-sown, and the soil is no longer compacted by heavy machinery.

That's a promising approach, especially for a subsistence economy that's supposed to have almost no impact on the environment. But seed producers like Monsanto, Corteva, or Syngenta will never offer these alternative grain varieties. In fact, they'll do everything in their power to ensure that such an approach never becomes widely known to the global population, let alone is allowed to be used. For these bloodsuckers, losing their annual revenue would be like torpedoing their own business model.

Plants can live together harmoniously, no matter how different they may seem. We humans, on the other hand, cannot. We see this almost hourly on the internet, as it is reported live from the Middle East. People oppress each other for decades, and when the oppressed rise up and resist, they are branded »terrorists« and murdered by the thousands in a hail of bombs without hesitation. Instead of working for peace, people encourage each other to arm themselves and wage war. The war in Ukraine alone wasn't enough; now Israel is waging war in Gaza as well… Plants don't wage war against other plants, do they? Yes, I suspect that some traditional gardeners would try to lecture me here about useful plants and weeds. But I don't see it that way. I can sense, just by looking at the diversity of plant life in a permaculture garden, that every plant grows where it can best integrate into the local ecosystem. And that every plant plays its part in the whole, even if I am perhaps unable to fully grasp that role.

How arrogant we humans are to presume to control the lives of other

beings, to destroy their and our habitats so thoroughly according to our own whims that no life can thrive there for decades…

›Aha! So the idea of growing grain this way only became established back then?‹ I understand that much of human behavior at that time was quite harmful to other living beings, and there was no realization yet that it was humans who needed to change and be considerate. But I find it very difficult, especially regarding food production, to imagine why this understanding wasn't present back then, yet is the norm today. The soft sound of tires on the cobblestones announces the arrival of the InterMod bus. The bus driver smiles at me.

"Hello young man! Is everything alright?"

I must look very self-absorbed.

“Yes, everything’s fine. I’m reading something very interesting right now,” I wave to her with the communicator and sit down right next to the door.

TransSocietyBoard

"Hi Mika! How are you? Great to see you!" he greets me.

Boris Aalbach is an old colleague of my father's. They spent a lot of time together as students and are good friends. Even so, I still find it difficult to address him by his first name. I know that none of the students he supervises do. After all, he's our professor and mentor.

"Hi, um... Boris..." I begin hesitantly. "Yes, I'm fine, thanks. However, so many different things are going through my head right now that it's almost making my head spin. So much is changing around me that it's hard to keep track of everything."

“Oh Mika, that’s what comes with age,” he laughs. “I think that’s why you’re coming to my office hours. I actually expected you to show up much sooner.”

“Yes, I wanted to come see you much sooner. I kept putting it off. But yesterday I had an interesting conversation with my family, and that finally gave me the impetus to come and see you.”

“How is your family?”

“Good, so far so good, why not? I want to travel and get to know other countries and communities. Perhaps I’ll even want to live with other people for a while. My

father told me about an irrigation project in Burkina Faso.”

"That sounds really exciting, Mika! You probably know that the trip to Africa will take quite some time. And certain preparations need to be made so that you can find suitable accommodation at each stop along the way."

"I'm well aware that such a long journey takes a lot of time, but I'd really like to have this experience. But how can I plan the itinerary and accommodation at the different stops in a way that makes sense? I know about the TransSocietyBoard, of course, but I haven't used it before... and since my first trip will be such a long one, I'd really appreciate your help, if you have the time..."

"Absolutely, you've come to the right place. Planning trips with the TransSocietyBoard is relatively easy. But one thing at a time: You mentioned a project. Do you know anything more about it?"

"No. My father just mentioned it yesterday. I haven't had a chance to research it further yet."

"Okay, then I suggest we just get started! First, we need some information about the project to find out exactly where you need to go. Then we'll look at an optional itinerary, and finally, we'll sort out the accommodation options."

Boris Aalbach's voice sounds as if he's already developed a routine for such occasions. I'm certainly not the only one who appreciates this man for precisely that reason. He's always incredibly helpful, no matter what it is.

“Yes, that sounds like a plan,” I say, somewhat taken aback by his speed. “Do... you... have a moment to do some research with me on the irrigation project in Burkina Faso? I’m not quite sure where to begin…”

Boris Aalbach taps on his communicator and smiles.

“Sure. Come here and have a look,” he invites me. “I’ll open the TransSocietyBoard and search for »Burkina Faso«… found it. And now »Open Projects« and under that, the menu item »With supra-regional support«.’”

“That’s really well structured,” I murmur, “…I could have figured that out myself…” “And »With supra-regional support« means that the projects need and involve help from all over the world?”

“Yes, exactly, simple and intuitive, like so much in the MultiNet!” Boris Aalbach emphasizes. “I’ll send you a link to the project list; you can browse through it yourself.

That way, you can also gain your first experiences with the TransSocietyBoard."

"Great, it's already there!" I exclaim happily.

"Shall we take a quick look at MultiMod? It's almost as simple as InterMod, only the travel times and transfers are handled differently. If MultiMod indicates a waiting time of a few days until the next onward journey today, it could be just a few hours tomorrow! Or a week if no one else needs to travel during that time. Long-distance travel needs reasonable capacity utilization to be viable."

"Why is there such a huge margin of error in the timing?" I ask curiously. "With InterMod, deviations are very rare. Only weather, disruptions, or accidents lead to longer waiting times."

"Well, look, the MultiMod system, like InterMod, is also built for real-time queries. If more goods need to be transported from A to B, then other possibilities and priorities arise. The journey can then certainly be accelerated, which means shorter travel times for passengers. Conversely, if a trip isn't fully utilized because, for example, the raw materials won't arrive in time, or a group of people changes their minds, then the system waits until the passage can be carried out in an energy-efficient and environmentally friendly way."

"That sounds very sensible; someone really thought this through," I laugh.

"Exactly, but it wasn't always like that. MultiMod requires everyone, everywhere, to participate and behave similarly. You mustn't forget that transport routes can span many regions, and many people from different cultures, some with very different customs and traditions, have to cooperate. Only then is its feasibility guaranteed. Long before you were born, during my childhood, people everywhere weren't ready to recognize the advantages of cooperation, which seem obvious to us today, and to work together. It took almost a decade for the system known today as MultiMod to become established everywhere. Your father and I, along with many others around the world, worked on that. During our studies, we traveled extensively and spoke with many people... just to achieve what is normal for you today. The system itself has also become much simpler since then, primarily because people naturally trust each other more today. This makes coordination much easier, and therefore the system as well. Well, but you should have already covered that in history class, right?"

"Yes, I know, but to be honest, I hadn't really consciously noticed it. Like you said, it's just obvious to me," I justify my question.

“No problem. That’s exactly what we wanted: for everything to be different for you,” Boris Aalbach smiles at me again and continues. “So, let’s look for a connection in MultiMod from… Mika, you’re from Walzbachtal, right?”

“Yes, exactly. And my grandparents, my mom’s parents, live in the village of Koti. Roughly in the middle of Burkina Faso.”

“Aha. Now I understand, Mika, why you want to travel so far away!” Boris Aalbach chuckles. “How do you spell the place?”

“K-O-T-I,” I spell it out and have to laugh too. “What have you realized?”

"Well, it's obvious you don't just want to work. But not everyone would undertake such a long journey to visit family..."

"Well, that's precisely the combination that's the challenge for me!" I exclaim. "Traveling, experiencing new things, getting to know different regions, interesting work, and then, by chance, meeting close relatives for the first time whom I've only ever seen on video calls."

"A nice challenge, isn't it? It takes a lot of determination and clarity to master it. That's how I've come to know and appreciate you here on campus, Mika!"

I'm a little embarrassed now. *›Why is he flattering me so much?‹* I ask myself. But Boris Aalbach is actually right. When I set my mind to something, I do everything I can to make it happen. But I don't really handle such direct praise very well.

Boris Aalbach types very skillfully into his communicator, and I'm amazed at how quickly he manages to link the necessary information and conditions so that the query can be started. *›Ah yes…‹* I think, *›My journey is slowly taking shape. Let's see what else comes of it.‹*

“So,” Boris Aalbach announces after a few seconds, “it says »Travel time from Walzbachtal to Koti« here.” He takes another look at the display and reads it to me: “»Estimated arrival in Koti in 68d07h45m43s«. That means if you were to leave immediately,” he adds.

“What? Sixty-eight days? That’s awfully long!” I exclaim. “I never would have expected such a long travel time!”

“But it’s an interesting and varied trip,” Boris Aalbach explains. “You’ve practically brought every existing mode of transportation along for the journey. And not because I chose it for you. That was the MultiMod itself. It searches for the most time-efficient route and then combines the estimated times of the available means of transport so

that the number of transfers is kept to a minimum. You can adjust this however you like, though; the query is configurable."

"Oh, yes?" I reply, confused. "Could you please send me a link to this monster trip? That would be very helpful. I'm afraid I'll have to delve into it and try to shorten it a bit, if possible."

"Sure thing, Mika, it's already on its way," Boris Aalbach promptly reports. "And by the way, if you tap on the stopovers in the connections, there's a search option for accommodation in shared houses or with families. Just pick what suits you best."

This is starting to be too much for me, I realize. My brain can barely process the flood of information anymore. I stand up.

"Thank you so much for the great support… mhm… Boris!"

›...Man!‹ I want to set off and process what I've experienced first. But curiosity is stronger. *›Now then!‹*

"Tell me, have you ever undertaken a journey like this?"

"You mean planned with the MultiMod? Yes, but nowhere near such a huge distance! Personally, I've only traveled around the Mediterranean, mostly to visit the many small settlements we're in contact with in our region. That was enough for me." He looks thoughtfully inward. "However, not too long ago I was in Italy and really wanted to see the ruins of the ancient metropolises of Milan, Venice, and Rome. That was my most recent trip. I had read a lot about these... cities—yes, that's what these huge communities were called back then—in old records. But I absolutely had to see it for myself! I wanted to be right in the middle of it... it was an impressive experience, I must say."

"How long did that trip take?"

"It took a little over five weeks, and it was all the fault of a group of people who ultimately canceled their trip because of an argument. Those idiots! Please excuse my language. Normally, I could have been in Milan in less than seven days," Boris Aalbach shakes his head. "But things don't always go as smoothly as we'd like… we're all only human, aren't we?" he says gently, standing up. A clear sign that the conversation is over.

"I see…" I murmur quietly. "Thanks again for your time and support, Boris."

"My pleasure. And if you have any further questions, you know my office hours,"

he smiles at me.

I'm exhausted. *›I managed to address Boris Aalbach informally!‹* I chuckle to myself. I've just learned a ton in the TransSocietyBoard crash course, and once again, more questions are popping up than were just answered. But I need a break now. I need to switch off. The door at the main entrance of the technology wing is sticking a bit. Once outside, I take a deep breath. I need fresh air, and it's wonderfully refreshing. It seems to have rained a few drops. The ground is damp, and a few drops are still trickling down from the leaves of the old chestnut trees. I feel like sitting on one of the benches along the main alley.

What Boris Aalbach said still resonates powerfully within me. *›So many thoughts...‹* The more I reflect on it, the more I realize how complex, yet how simple, communication between people must have become today. *›Perhaps precisely because cooperating has become second nature?‹* If I remember correctly, I once read in Ethan's notes that communication wasn't as easy in the very early days as it is today. I search for the keyword. Two entries are listed.

> *April 22, 2039*
>
> *It felt like a long time coming, but now things are slowly starting to work again. We've just launched a local telephone and internet network between our communities in the Odenwald and Black Forest. Noram had a lot to learn, and procurement groups from many communities helped find the necessary parts. Noram is still constantly on the go, and Jitu is following him like a shadow. He also wants to learn everything he needs to know to help advance local networking in Burkina Faso.*
>
> *Since we now operate a self-built wind power system in addition to the photovoltaic system, we can even afford to run a server, which we need for the new internet.*
>
> *I also travel a lot to talk to people and stay in touch with them. Through this constant travel, it's become increasingly clear to me that very few people are left and that most have joined one community or another. I could even say that people who don't live in a community—I mean a community that's networked with us and working*

for transformation—have become very rare. We also consciously try to approach people we meet by chance and invite them to join us. There's so much to do, and every person is valuable.

The radio meeting also makes it clear that communication between communities organized in all parts of the world is becoming increasingly stable. Everywhere, efforts are being made to build and maintain a stable communication network. It is also clear to everyone that it must be a completely decentralized network, with responsibility shared by the participating communities.

Attempts were even made to reactivate some of the existing cable connections between continents for telephone communication. Many of these attempts have failed so far, because these telecommunications hubs are mostly still controlled by armed groups of various stripes who hope to gain an advantage in seizing power.

For this reason, global intercontinental communication within the new community movement is predominantly and will continue to be conducted via radio transmission. The radio stations that remain in operation primarily serve to disseminate information and event dates.

This is especially relevant for the dates of the first global radio conferences, in which participants from all regions of the world will take part to develop and disseminate an initial draft of common global principles. The main difference from local radio meetings is that the global conferences always take place at a different time within the 24-hour period, so that only a few participants have to be awake in the middle of the night on a rotating basis. This is intended to emphasize that all communities consider each other as equals and that no region claims leadership, as, for example,»the West« used to claim over the entire world…

I think it's great, and I helped organize the conference. Especially with the moderation protocol, because moderating one-way communication isn't easy. Every participant has to wait to speak, and the large number of people can't see each other. But it worked wonderfully. I noticed how it also made the atmosphere in the group discus-

sions much more relaxed.

It is truly a pleasure to witness how people naturally draw upon the existing knowledge and experience of those present to bring a shared idea to fruition. Something, I can sense, is different in the perception of the people with whom I am currently communicating.

October 30, 2039

Today is our twenty-second day of travel, and we're resting in the Alella community, just outside Barcelona. I haven't written for a while, partly because I was too tired, or because I preferred to focus on the people and the organization of the meeting. We don't have much time left to get to Casablanca, as the in-person meeting is scheduled for January 2040. Jitu thinks everything will work out. He's struggling a lot with lugging the radio, but he's not complaining and isn't accepting any help. He still has to carry the relatively heavy equipment as far as Gibraltar, then it's off to the ship and on to Casablanca.

Up to this point, we've essentially been passed from one networked community to the next. In France, the communication and transport routes between these communities seem better organized than at home. The exchange is lively, and it's noticeable that people are much closer than we're used to. That's very encouraging. It shows that we're all on the right track.

To our delight and Noram's enthusiasm, we also discovered that the efforts to reuse analog telephone lines for telephony and internet access have been very successful. All the communities we visited already had at least one stable telephone line, completely separate from the digital switching centers. Noram explained that the regional internet team deliberately chose to have the decentralized community network avoid the old communication hubs and rely solely on analog lines and switching centers to create direct connections between the networked communities. The reason for this, of course, is that some of the major internet exchange points are still controlled by armed groups who refuse to cooperate, hoping to gain an advantage

from doing so.

The electricity supply required for the rudimentary internet is, as expected, organized locally and is unfortunately still very unstable. Data transfer rates are also still extremely low, but they do allow for the transmission of important documents and enable the cross-regional coordination that is needed.

However, the existing network means that we can communicate with Adina from every community we visit to keep her and our people in Walzbachtal informed. Noram was even able to send Adina via email a picture of us that he took with his smartphone. A small thing in itself, but a big step at this time.

What I find particularly interesting from my perspective is that the realization that humans, as consciousness able beings, must assume a significant responsibility for preserving the life-sustaining context on planet Earth, is being reached and publicly discussed simultaneously in many places and by many individuals across the planet. I have spoken with people in various communities who have shared their profound feelings about this in different ways. For example, there is also open discussion about the need for humanity to carefully consider how many people the planet can truly »sustain«, if all other living beings are considered equal as well. This is an important realization that requires considerable courage to express.

Noram and I are really looking forward to the meeting in Casablanca. I can't even imagine what the atmosphere will be like there…

It's not quite what I expected. Ethan's post about digital communication that I read was different. His tone wasn't very optimistic. *›These other posts, however, also look at a different time period, if I understand correctly…‹* I think fleetingly. The topic interests me, but I realize my mind is currently occupied with other stories.

Unspoken

I text Ajola and Reyad to say I'd like to meet them for lunch in the cafeteria. I head there quickly. It is already quite late. From the entrance, I see that they are both al-

ready waiting inside.

"Hey, are you guys as hungry as I am right now? I could eat a huge…" I don't get any further.

"Yeah, yeah," Ajola replies. "You can always eat, and your hunger is always insatiable!" she laughs. "But you're always so late to the cafeteria that all the really delicious things have already been taken off the menu. Your huge something is certainly no longer available…"

“I’ll see what’s left…” I reply meekly, ordering a pizza with every topping that’s still available.

“What have you been up to today?” Reyad asks. “You look pretty exhausted and tired.”

“Oh yeah, it was a super tiring day…” I hear myself say. “First, I visited Grandpa, then I helped Lares and his buddy Max fix the pickthresher…”

“Max Holitzki? He’s a bit too arrogant, I think,” Reyad interrupts. “He always thinks he knows best and is usually wrong in the end!”

“Well, at least he was hard at work today and kept his mouth shut,” I chime in. “And then I was at Boris Aalbach’s until just now, and he gave me a crash course on the TransSocietyBoard! Seriously, a very fast crash course,” I laugh. “That’s why I look so tired…”

Reyad shakes his head with a smile, but Ajola looks at me in surprise. The amused smile on her lips has given way to a very serious expression.

"The TransSocietyBoard and Boris Aalbach?" she asks. "So your plans are becoming concrete very quickly after all?"

"Have you ordered anything yet?" I ask somewhat embarrassed, deliberately avoiding Ajola's gaze.

I'm not quite sure how to break it to her that I actually see myself on the road in a few weeks. I understand what she means, but her question came across as a bit too abrupt.

„Mika?“

I think Ajola's voice sounds a bit harsh.

"Yes, yes, I'm here," I whisper, looking around as if searching for something that's somewhere else and not on the table.

"Could you perhaps stop this drama and answer my question? What have you decided? Do you already have something concrete planned, or not yet?"

›She's annoyed...‹ I think, and I can feel the blood rushing to my cheeks.

“Uh, yeah, sure, that’s why I was with Boris Aalbach,” I begin, stammering. “We were looking for a possible project I could participate in,” I finally say, stuffing a piece of pizza into my mouth.

“…And?”

Ajola and Reyad are looking at me like they expect me to bring up something big. It makes me uncomfortable, but I can't really say why. And what does Reyad care about anyway?

“And we found something…” I begin, trying to look cool. Obviously, I fail miserably, because Ajola snatches the plate away with an energetic gesture and takes my hand in hers, clearly expectant.

“Speak!” she commands in such a loud voice that Reyad nearly falls under the table laughing.

“Let me go!” I protest unconvincingly, finally meeting her eyes. “What do you want? I’ll tell you! Please let me eat first, okay?”

“No, no, you’re not getting away that easily,” Ajola smirks. “Tell us now! You’re quite presumptuous with your arrogance, don’t you think? Come on, I want to hear it now: What kind of project is it, and when are you planning to leave? And most importantly, when were you going to tell me?”

Reyad is having a coughing fit and is making as if to get up.

“Guys, I think I have something to do…” he says very quietly, and is promptly corrected by Ajola:

“Please sit down and don’t interrupt me when I’m talking to Mika. You’re interested too, aren’t you?”

Reyad sits down again and Ajola looks at me so intensely that I can only think one thing: *›She has such beautiful eyes, man! And I'm about to leave?‹* I gather all my strength and try to speak coherently.

"Mhm, um, yes, of course I wanted to tell you that, I mean, I'm doing that right now, aren't I, you, you all, I mean, you understand..."

"Mika! Finally tell us what this is about... I'm bursting with curiosity! Please don't

keep us in suspense like this!"

›Now I should kiss her, shouldn't I?‹

"Okay, okay. I'm going to Burkina Faso for six months soon. There's an irrigation project there that I want to participate in, and I'll also be visiting my relatives there. You know that my mother is originally from there, right?"

The silence couldn't be more palpable. Ajola's eyes grow wider and wider, then duller and moister.

"When exactly will you be leaving?" she asks in such a quiet voice that I can hardly understand her.

This time I look at Reyad with a serious expression, and he understands immediately. After a few seconds, Ajola and I are alone. Reyad has disappeared, and Ajola sits silently in front of me, staring intently.

“What’s going on?” I venture to say after a few moments.

I don't dare, but I'd love to hug her right now and… Ajola raises her eyes and our gazes meet in no man's land, between my heart, which is pounding like crazy… and hers. I could swear hers is doing the same.

"Well," she says quietly, "you're right... what do I actually want?"

"I didn't mean it like that," I try to regain control of the situation. "I would have told you already. I'm a little surprised that you're insisting on it now and..."

"Mika, how long have you known me?"

"What's with that question? As long as you've known me..."

"Oh, forget it! I thought we were good friends and didn't have any secrets from each other..."

›Huh? I don't understand a thing...‹

"Ajola, what's that all about? I have no idea what you mean. Of course we're friends and I don't have any secrets from you. I just haven't had a chance to tell you everything yet. This all only happened today!"

›Who ever told me that a man shouldn't try to understand women?‹ I think, completely thrown by Ajola's behavior. She's no longer looking at me, but at the floor, and I can tell she's very sad. I just don't know why. I can't imagine what I could have done wrong. I don't say anything at first. Almost against my will, I place my hand on

her shoulder, and we both recoil in shock.

"No, please don't!"

Ajola's voice is icy. She looks at me again and follows with a seriousness that completely paralyzes me:

"You really have no idea what I'm talking about, do you? You say you're my friend, and yet you haven't a clue what I'm talking about? Is that so?"

"Mhm, yes..."

"Well, let's go home now, or I'm going home. I'm tired."

She stands up and at that moment I just can't take it anymore and I stop her.

"No! I'm not letting you go like this this time! You have to tell me what's going on! And yes, I don't understand you... maybe I do, but I'd rather hear it from you... anyway, it's not easy for me to have this conversation with you right now, and I don't even know why. There's more to it, I can feel it inside, but I'm not sure if I want to discuss it with you right now, and..."

Then suddenly she's in my arms, presses her head against my chest, hits me with her fists and screams:

"Man, just shut up! If you don't know anything about anything..."

›And now?‹

I hear her voice as if in a dream. As in a dream I never dared to dream.

"If you're gone for so long, I'm going to miss you a lot..."

I want to say something. But I can't. Those would have been my words, too. *›Why didn't I notice that before?‹*

"It's not forever. I'll be back. Can we get through this time?" I ask.

"I don't know... it feels like an eternity," she sobs. "I don't even know what I'm going to do next..."

She calms down a little and breaks free from the hug.

"When are you planning to leave?" she asks quietly.

"I don't know enough about the project yet. But I think it could start in a few weeks."

"Do you already have an idea of how you'll get to Burkina Faso?"

"Nothing concrete yet. Boris Aalbach tried to find a connection on the

TransSocietyBoard. It takes about seventy days if everything goes well; maybe it'll be faster."

"What do you know about the project?"

"I have the project description, but I haven't been able to look at it yet. Shall we take a look at it together sometime?"

"We'll do that sometime later. I'd like to get out into the fresh air. Will you come with me?" Ajola suggests, taking my hand.

Travel Plans

Conversation with the Family

"Leyla? Do you have a moment?" I ask my mother, who's busy working in her study.

"What's up, Mika?"

"I have a rough idea of the trip now, but I still have a million questions. For example, I'd like to know how I can prepare for my visit with Grandma Kyara and Grandpa Jitu. Should I bring them anything? How do people interact in Burkina Faso? What should I keep in mind when interacting with them?"

"Oh, Mika," my mother laughs, "it's really not that complicated. If I were you, I'd let my parents know first that you're planning to visit them at home. Then you can also find out if they'd like to bring anything."

"Okay, that's easy. And what about social interactions in Burkina Faso in general?"

"You already know most of the customs, since we practice them together here. But if you walk around in shorts and shirtless, you're sure to make no friends..." Leyla laughs.

"Are the customs really that strict there? Well, okay, then I'll pack some long pants," I play along and sit down next to my mother.

"ClothBots will accompany you on your journey!" says Simon, who has appeared curiously in the doorway. "By the way, they're programmed so you can find clothing that's typical for the country and climate-friendly... even on a ship or train. But remember to take some clothes with you, because the ClothBots like to recycle and usually want to be fed with materials to be recycled."

"Good thing you mentioned it, I probably wouldn't have thought about the recyclable clothes. What else do I need for the trip?" I ask.

"You always have your communication device with you. If you want to record your travel impressions, which I highly recommend, use it extensively and share them with us via MultiNet," Simon says with a grin. "You might want to pack a few personal items that can help ease a bout of homesickness."

"Um, yeah, I'll remember that," I say with a smile.

“Boris and I took several trips during our university days, back when the MultiMod system was still in its infancy. We always meticulously documented our travel experiences and incorporated those insights into improving MultiMod. Back then, we traveled with a lot of luggage because supplies were still unreliable. But we never left home without our camera equipment. We ended up with hundreds of fascinating videos featuring interviews with people from other countries, and breathtaking landscape shots along the way. The old communication systems simply couldn't capture that kind of quality.” Simon is practically bursting with pride. “My most memorable trip ended right outside Leyla's shared apartment in a housing estate in what used to be Switzerland. Without that encounter, you probably wouldn't be sitting here asking these kinds of questions…”

I'm speechless. I've never heard the story of my parents' reunion told so vividly before.

“What now,” I venture to ask, “right there on the spot? I thought I…”

My mother, who is obviously very moved by the memory of those old times, impatiently interrupts our conversation.

"So, Simon, it's time you took care of the food. I still need to organize a few things for the spring wheat harvest." Then she turns to me, "Um, Mika? By the way, how's the pickthresher coming along? It's supposed to be used this weekend, right?" she asks. "Were you able to fix it so it doesn't break down again?"

"We found the problem and fixed it this time so it's ready to go," I reply. "When are you actually starting?"

"Everyone meets at the equipment shed at seven o'clock on Saturday. Please be on time!"

“Yes, of course, I’ll be there. But now back to me…” I persist. “Right now, I’m more interested in how I can prepare for my trip. I have a vague idea of what I could and should take, but no clue what to expect on the road… so don’t start panicking about food and harvests and all that. Can’t you calmly explain how it actually works? I mean, you both left home very early and traveled extensively. I, on the other hand, have hardly ever left our local area. Surely you can tell me what I can expect out there, can’t you?”

“Now, now, young man, what kind of tone is that!” my father exclaimed indignantly

with a smile on his face. "But we have to eat, right? And if I don't prepare this now, we probably won't get anything on the table. It would be best if you come into the kitchen with me, chop some food, and maybe I could tell you a thing or two while we're at it. Right? What do you think?"

Of course, I can't refuse the offer, even though I really don't feel like chopping anything. *›Damn...‹* I think, *›I always pick the best situations to ask my questions...‹*

“Are you coming now?” I hear my father’s voice from the kitchen and slowly shuffle along behind, accompanied by the boisterous laughter of my mother, who seems to be coming along too.

I love my parents, but sometimes I think they have a little too much fun teasing me.

“Yes, I’m already on my way,” I call out and turn into my room.

I'm going to pick up my communicator. No sooner do I have it in my hand than it displays the project list that Boris Aalbach sent me. I'll need the list when I ask Simon my questions, which, surprisingly, I can't even think of right now. I also realize that my mother's few explanations aren't nearly enough to help me imagine what awaits me there at my grandparents' house. A few more clicks and the pivot search through all known documents on Burkina Faso has started. The communicator can do that on its own. I have to go to the kitchen now and chop some food, but the communicator is coming with me to the table.

With the three of us, the food will be ready in no time. My hands work reflexively as I keep glancing at the screen. *›The search has been taking forever...‹*

"Mika? Are you still here at the table?" I hear Simon ask.

"Leave him alone..." Leyla laughs, "lest he cuts his fingers in fright!"

"Yes, yes, but he's supposed to cut the potatoes into the pan, not the peels..."

I stare in disbelief at what I'm actually doing and at the faces of the two of them, and I can't help but laugh. I carefully gather the peels from the pan and the potatoes from the compost bin, and I must look very bewildered.

"Mika, thank you for your help!" Simon sobbs with laughter. "How about you just use your communicator in your room? We'll call you when dinner's ready, okay?"

I suspect I must look very red in the face. At least that's how I feel—ashamed, but also relieved. Two or three steps and the door is closed. What do we have here? Ap-

parently, I had also linked Ethan's notebooks with the search parameters, because the first entry that comes up is a very disturbing one.

> *June 1, 2018*
>
> *Adina sent me a Deutsche Welle report today on the topic of female genital mutilation, including an assessment from Terre des Femmes. It describes the practices in various African countries. While the number of procedures on girls appears to be declining in Burkina Faso, there is hardly any change in Sierra Leone… in other countries, such as Kenya, female doctors are seeking legal permission to perform the procedures "in the best possible way" under hygienic conditions in hospitals. I can't reconcile this in my mind… how can female doctors even participate in something like this? Even though I understand that their hands are tied and that they are trying to do the best for the girls affected by at least ensuring a hygienic procedure, I still find it very difficult to look at them favorably. Yes, I have to admit that I struggle to accept that female genital mutilation is still one of the most extreme violations of women's rights in the world. This is still all too often overlooked in some parts of Africa and conveniently mistaken for so-called tradition. Horrible!*
>
> *I'm all the more grateful that we don't have to live there. Even though I'm increasingly worried about Zanga's family these days. People there are happy if they don't have to worry about their next meal... and it's also clear to me that we can live so well here precisely because they have to live so badly there... I'm actually less concerned about the climate right now, even though the press here is reporting the hottest summer in a long time. Unfortunately, those who are starving or worried about their survival can't also take care of our planet.*

I sincerely hope these barbaric rituals haven't survived to this day. I can't really imagine what they are about, or rather, what they were about, but something inside me knows that whatever was done back then would have no place in today's world, in the world as I know it, anywhere on the planet. I'm not sure I really want to know any more details about it. I actually wanted to know how people live in Burkina Faso to-

day. But I think it's good that notebook entries are also included in the research. That way, I might be able to understand my grandparents better, because they are much closer to Ethan's experiences than I ever could be.

"Mika, the food is ready!", Simon's voice booms.

Itinerary

It's not easy to cope with all this information. My back aches. I realize I'm sitting a bit hunched over on the bed. I get up and open the window. The leaves of the two poplar trees at the edge of the garden rustle in the wind. The setting sun paints the evening sky reddish. I feel tired, but I'm determined to continue my preparations. I sit down in the armchair and try to keep my back straight. Another notebook entry catches my eye.

> *September 18, 2018*
>
> *Zanga looks completely exhausted. The events in Burkina Faso are truly horrific, even though the press here only reports on them superficially and with a political bias. First, the military ousted the corrupt government from parliament. This paved the way for the Islamic State. One of the poorest and least developed countries in the world simply cannot find peace. Zanga is rightly worried about his family. Jitu, his son, is just ten years old and, if I understood Zanga correctly, not his only child. Food self-sufficiency is hanging by a thread due to water shortages. The people in the region around Koti, where Zanga's family lives, traditionally practice subsistence farming. Without enough water, they can hardly produce a sufficient yield to feed everyone. They depend on aid, if it even reaches the affected regions. Under these political circumstances, no help can be expected from the state, and what help the United States and Europe are currently offering in terms of aid only increases dependency, not the welfare of the people on the ground.*
>
> *I honestly don't know how we can best help Zanga and his family right now. I would do more, but I lack the resources… and even if I did, it wouldn't change the root causes, because the problem runs*

much deeper than any aid package from Germany could solve. Zanga keeps saying that we shouldn't worry, that his people will manage, as they always have in the past… but I can feel his unease inside me, no matter what he says…

While the information doesn't help with travel preparation, it gives me an unexpected insight into the different perspectives from which the Burkina Faso region was viewed during Ethan's time. Ethan is worried about his friend's family, yet his comment is somehow detached. It's obvious to me that Ethan can't truly identify with Zanga on an emotional level. He's worrying, so to speak, from here, from a safe environment. *›Will I, too, travel there and arrive there like someone who comes from a safe environment where life is easier to manage?‹* I suddenly find myself wondering.

The thought process is unpleasant. I shake myself vigorously and swipe across the screen, as if to rid myself of my own thoughts. One more entry about the situation, and then I'll continue with the actual preparation.

February 1, 2022

Oxfam published an interesting article: »Dispute over water – emerging conflicts and the climate crisis are making drinking water supply a challenge in Burkina Faso«.

I forwarded it to Zanga. On the one hand, the support for building storage facilities to be better prepared for poor harvests is noteworthy. On the other hand, wastewater treatment is now being implemented to counteract desertification, which is also affecting gardens.

With European support, more and more cisterns are now being built to store water.

My only fear is that all of this will once again be organized without regard for the realities in Africa, and that, once again, the training of local people in the maintenance of the facilities will be forgotten. In the event of repairs, spare parts will then have to be purchased from Europe, for which the money simply isn't available and can't be... where would it come from? I'm increasingly annoyed that in the so-called »first world« countries of the West, even aid has often a hidden agenda – it, too, must ultimately be profitable for the domestic econ-

> *omy. What's conveniently ignored, however, is that the aid is actually needed because Western countries are helping themselves to resources from Africa as if it were their own pantry.*
>
> *Here, in Europe, the comparatively well-fed French took to the streets in the Yellow Vest protests, demanding more money and greater equality in wealth distribution. The French government's reaction was harsh. In the US, white police officers are killing Black citizens, and the declared "coronavirus pandemic" continues despite a lack of scientific evidence. All of this seems to have no impact on life in Burkina Faso. The world is more focused on what Trump and the QAnon activists are doing than on the crucial issues of daily life in the world's poorest countries.*

Ah yes, this post brings me a little closer to my journey. From my studies of African history, I already know that water supply, especially in the Sahel region, was a life-threatening problem even a hundred years ago. Solutions were sought even then, but unfortunately, few were found.

I turn to the project list on the TransSocietyBoard. I had already seen this project in Burkina Faso there. It's about water supply in regions where desertification threatens people's livelihoods. The project description is complex. Various combined technical systems are to be used to extract, store, and distribute water. Transparent photovoltaic panels are needed, which aren't manufactured locally but could be sourced in the Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer community in southern France. Transport is scheduled to start in France in three weeks. *›That could be my ride!‹* I think to myself. *›But first, I need to let the project group know that I'd like to participate... there, sent... I'm curious to see when I'll get a response.‹*

In MultiMod, I can't immediately find a voyage from Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer that includes the solar panels. But a large shipment seems to be planned from Marseille to Africa. Expected departure in three weeks. *›Ah, I see...‹* A closer look reveals that while the freighter has Marseille as its port of departure, it will also stop in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer to take on additional cargo.

›Ah, the response is coming in. That was quick... oh, just an automated reply...‹ I'm supposed to describe my qualifications and prepare for an extended stay. Accommodation for that time should also already be arranged. I notice how my

thoughts are being stirred by the prospect of my upcoming trip. It's a very nice feeling, I must admit, even though I don't really know what I'm getting myself into.

What's bothering me most is how I'm going to get to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in just three weeks. So far, MultiMod is only showing me connections that take longer than three weeks. It seems that at this time of year, probably due to harvest season, most people tend to stay home, and therefore transport options are extremely limited. This could be a problem if I absolutely need to leave immediately to catch a ship to West Africa. Anyway, I've entered my travel plans into MultiMod. Let's see if any other options arise.

"Well, very busy?"

My father is looking at me curiously through the crack in the door. *›Very interesting, he's always somehow nearby when I unconsciously need him,‹* I think.

"Good question. I'm trying to find a travel connection to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer that will allow me to catch the freighter that's supposed to sail to Africa in three weeks. The problem is, I can't find one, and I'm afraid I'll miss the passage. Do you have any idea how I could still get there?"

"How did you request the trip?"

"Via Milan, of course. That's the shortest route, isn't it?"

“Not really, it’s just the most frequently used route towards the Italian peninsula, and because there are quite a few travel options along that route, it can sometimes even seem shorter. However, it’s not really suitable for getting to the south of France,” Simon says thoughtfully. “But you know what month it is and that connections are only provided as needed. Try traveling via France. The only regions in between are those with a relatively high volume of freight traffic at this time of year because they have to help each other with the harvest. The route feels much longer, but in reality, the actual distance is shorter, and the connections are relatively frequent.”

“And you know that because?” I ask incredulously, as his logic isn’t entirely clear to me.

“Well, I tried it myself once when I was traveling. It’s not very convenient, as you’re constantly changing means of transport, but it works. And it seems to me that it’s very important to you. Or am I mistaken?”

›There's something to that...‹ I have to admit to myself.

"And what should I enter as stopovers, please?"

"Try Strasbourg, Dijon, Lyon with Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer as your destination. That should generate the correct connections."

I enter the data and wait. My father waits patiently in the doorway. It gets on my nerves when he seems so ready to leave.

"Why don't you sit here with me? You can help me too, I'm sure," I invite him.

"No, no, I have to leave right away. I'm just waiting until the first suggestions are listed so I can be sure you have the correct route. After that, you'll manage on your own. You're not a little boy anymore, are you?" my father waves me off.

I'm not saying anything about the »little boy« thing. I don't want to play into his hands. It's an old game between us, ever since I wanted to drive the tractor by myself when I was only five. He knows my weaknesses, the old man.

The results search in MultiMod beeps, and the route suggestions look exactly as he predicted. I would reach Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in sixteen days, requiring twenty-two train changes. The journey even includes two ten-kilometer sections that I would have to cycle if I wanted to catch the next connection on time. But it would be possible. I look up, but my father has already disappeared.

›I can’t take much with me on a bike... but I don’t think I want to anyway. Traveling light is much more pleasant.‹ I enter my qualifications for the project into the online form. I have no concerns that I wouldn’t be a good fit. After all, I just completed my studies in systems automation and mechanical engineering, skills that are needed there. One click and the data is sent off.

One thought is still swirling around in my head. It starts with »A« and ends with »a«. No, it's not funny. I really don't know how I could tell Ajola that we won't see each other for so long. I have to admit, it's not easy for me right now either. For her, though, it seems to be a very serious matter. Much more serious than for me. *›At least from my perspective...‹*

Harvesting Work

›The night was somehow too short,‹ I think, trying to heave myself out of bed. A blackbird outside my window loudly announces its claim to the entire garden. The first rays of sunlight bathe the old rocking chair in an unreal light. I'm still tired, but as

my mother always says, what has to be done, has to be done. I'd rather stay in bed, but I can well imagine that wouldn't be a good idea today if so many others would have to wait for me. *›What was that saying? Trousers first, then shoes...‹* a thought flickers as I groggily prepare for the work ahead. I hear plates and glasses being set on the table in the kitchen, and the smell of breakfast is already in the air. I'm probably the last one up. I reach for the wrong side of the door, can't find the handle, and chuckle dully to myself. *›Mika, you obviously have to be very careful today, lest...‹* I can't finish the thought. My brother's voice echoes through the hallway:

"Mika! Are you finally getting out of bed? We need to get going!"

"Yes, yes," I try to reply, but my voice isn't really cooperating.

"Mika? Are you awake?"

I finally manage to open the door and stand there dumbfounded in front of Lares, who, fully dressed and with his mouth full, wants to leave immediately.

“Ah, there he is at last! Well, you prince, are you coming with me, or what?” he munches away at me with great joy.

Somehow, I can't really share his enthusiasm.

"Yeah man, sure. I see you've already had breakfast? Can I too?"

I realize I'm getting a little annoyed and I don't really know why. Lares gently breaks the enlightening news to me:

"We should have been at the fire station half an hour ago, you know? Everyone's already left, and I'm pretty sure you want to come along? Or not?"

"What? So late already? Why didn't you wake me up earlier?" I try a feeble justification. "I'm tired, man, I could have slept much longer."

"Doesn't count! Here, take this roll and let's go. Mom says the weather forecast predicted a storm. We have to finish picking the whole field in front of the mill today, and we don't have much time. I mean, if the pickthresher doesn't give us any trouble!"

›He's right about that,‹ I have to admit to myself as I put on my work boots, a roll in one hand. My mind is still foggy from the night. I give up trying to resist the situation and follow Lares without hesitation.

The equipment shed is only a few minutes' walk away, and I hope the brisk walk will clear my head. We walk at a fast pace, and I'm just glad that Lares is so patient. I'm

not so glad that he's also in such good shape. I can hardly keep up with him. Lares is a passionate runner, and he always manages to leave me breathless when we have to go somewhere together. This time, too, I have to slow him down:

“Hey, hey, slow down, you madman! You want me to get there too, don’t you? I still need to be able to drive, you know…”

“Don’t give up now, you prince,” he laughs at me and doesn’t slow down at all.

As expected, I can barely breathe and my knees are shaking when we arrive. But we're clearly not the last ones. Our neighbors and some people from our community are still standing in front of the equipment shed, seemingly waiting for something, or someone. Everyone has tools with them, and we're not getting any special attention. ›Good,‹ I think to myself, and I sneak inside to the pickthresher.

The engine started reflexively, and Lares opened the gate so I could drive out. The mental fog wasn't completely gone, but what's learned and practiced now happens automatically. I drove the pickthresher out as if I'd been there for hours, doing nothing but waiting for everyone else. Still no reaction. Everyone made way, but there was no sense of departure. I looked at Lares:

"What's going on here? Why is everyone standing around?"

"I have no idea," says Lares, "I'll ask. I can't see Mom at all, maybe everyone's waiting for her...?"

I look out at the crowd and try to read what people might be thinking in their faces. They seem to be just waiting. No fear, no unease. I stop the engine and get out of the cabin. A light wind is already blowing from the northeast, and dark clouds are visible on the horizon.

“Hey Mika, it might be too early to take the pickthresher out,” says Oliver, a colleague from the workshop. “Leyla’s just gone to the weather station to check the forecast for today. Those who should be there aren’t answering their phones, or they have no signal again… We might not be able to start today. We need at least two days of dry weather if we want to harvest and store everything. Today alone isn’t enough. A lot could still be left in the field, and the dampness would really mess up the storage.”

“Aha…” I hear my voice, a little strangely, but I can’t continue with my question.

A bicycle bell rings and my mother appears from behind the equipment shed. She is

drenched in sweat and needs a moment to compose herself before she can speak.

“Guys,” she begins with a smile, her breathing catching. “Everything’s fine! The predicted storm is coming, but it’ll pass us far enough that we won’t get a drop of rain. We can get started, right now!” she announces, her eyes shining. She then turns to me and hisses, “So you made it too, Mika?” and then very quietly, so only I can hear, “If it hadn’t been for this unclear situation, you would have messed up our whole schedule today… what’s wrong with you? I don’t recognize you at all!”

“Uh…”

“Never mind, start the engine and get to work! We’re all dependent on the pick-thresher… Please!”

My mother is quite a sight, I'm constantly reminded. I climb back into the cabin and, before her voice is drowned out by the engine noise, I hear her say:

"I know you are all aware of the importance of this work. That's another reason why I thank you for being here in time. Let's begin and hope that the storm will indeed spare us."

›If anyone can organize, it's my mother!‹ I think to myself with a smile as I drive towards the edge of the field. Behind me, all the other people who will carry out the subsequent work steps are lined up. I have to admit, I enjoy being the first one to get the work started. My mother glances at me briefly from the edge of the field. Her eyes shine. I know she's not angry with me.

Suddenly I realize that with all this fieldwork starting today, I won't be there until the end. I plan to leave in about five days. Yes, I want to. I don't necessarily have to. But something is pulling me away, more strongly than I would have initially thought. More than a month has flown by. When I think about it now, it's been a very busy few weeks, packed with things. All the conversations, the reflections, the practical planning and preparations have come together like puzzle pieces, forming a fairly concrete picture of my future journey. *›I don't really feel ready for it yet... but I definitely want to leave!‹* I have the feeling that I still have a few things to do before the trip, but nothing immediately comes to mind that might still need doing. *›I'll find out soon enough,‹* I chuckle to myself.

Oliver's Travel Experience

I'm doing the last round for today; it's getting dark soon. Oliver is pleased that all the threshing residue, properly pressed and tied up, is stored in the barn next to the equipment shed.

"This is a great building material for our straw and clay buildings," he says. "Now they're drying out and can soon be used. Some of the houses still need repairs and extensions."

"Yes, that's right," I agree, "and we'll have even more tomorrow if the weather holds. We did a good job today, didn't we?"

I am very satisfied and I feel that everyone who was there shares this feeling.

“I have to go now,” I add. “I’m currently preparing for a trip. I probably won’t be able to stay until the end of the harvest. Could you take over the pickthresher for me if it’s still needed?”

I see the confusion on Oliver's face and add:

"I've finished my studies and would like to travel the world a bit. I'm going to visit my grandparents in Burkina Faso and work on an irrigation project there."

"Oh, so you're ready to leave us... Yes, that's a good thing. I also traveled two years ago, though not as far, just here in Europe, in Spain, also for a water-related project. It's a real problem in some places to get enough water so that all living beings, not just us humans, have enough."

Oliver looks at me thoughtfully. He's only four or five years older than me, and I wonder why I didn't know he'd already been away on a journey. I hadn't even noticed he was gone.

"You'd already been away? Wow, if I'd known, I would have come to you first. I was at Boris Aalbach's, got some advice from him. He pointed out a few details to me. I also talked to my dad. Just not to someone our age. Great," I beam at him, "what was it like when you were on your trip?"

"Not so different from home, to be honest. The unknown scared me a lot at first, until I finally realized that people are friendly almost everywhere. I also learned how to connect different modes of transport using the MultiMod from Boris Aalbach. It's not rocket science, apparently. After a few days, I was so good at it that I could easily change my route several times and adapt it to my needs. I mean, while I was on the

road. You get tips everywhere from the people you're staying with. Where there's something interesting to see or where help is needed. I originally wanted to go straight to Seville, but I ended up taking a shortcut via Stockholm and spent a few months in the Swedish lake district with the fishermen. I can tell you one thing about that, if you're interested: there are billions of mosquitoes there!"

I listen to him intently. I hadn't realized that Oliver was such a good storyteller. Up until then, we'd only talked about screws and engines, and the longest conversation we'd had was about a cylinder head gasket.

"Yes, I believe you, however, I intend to travel south, not north. Nevertheless, I suspect there will be mosquitoes there too. But tell me, what did you take with you? I'm not sure how much I should carry by me. What do you absolutely need, and what can I find anywhere anyway?"

"You'll hardly believe it, but I'm the right person to answer this question. I set off with a heavy backpack, only to throw it into the ClothBot after two days and get myself a small ten-liter bag containing just my most personal belongings. You practically don't need to take anything that you're not wearing or, for whatever reason, think you might need. You can get everything else anywhere. Whether from the ClothBot or from the people you're staying with, it doesn't matter. You'll always find exactly what you need. The most important lesson for me was that I could really rely on people to help me. Just don't be afraid to ask the people you meet along the way," Oliver says, smiling at me. “Yes, I know,” he continues after a short pause, “it’s not easy to take helpfulness for granted. That’s my experience, though. Of course, I only know the customs here in Europe. I did a lot of research on this in MultiNet at the time, as I didn’t want to believe that this attitude would be found in people in all regions of the world, but I didn’t find any reports that refuted it.”

“That sounds very promising,” I whisper, a little intimidated by Oliver’s story. “You’ve gained so much experience so early… I have to say, I’m impressed!”

“You don’t need to be,” Oliver smiles. “I enjoy talking about it, but experiencing it firsthand is something else entirely. I think it’s wonderful that another member of our community is embarking on this journey. I’ve been the only one in the last fifteen years. Before me, it was our parents. Well, I’m also the only one my age in our community. Your cohort has been too young for it so far… I’m curious to see how you’ll experience this trip and whether and how it will change you.” He smiles at me

and gives me a brotherly pat on the shoulder. “I wish you all the best for your journey. I have to go home now; my pregnant Anika is waiting for me.”

Oliver quickly rides off on his bicycle, and I feel my breath catch. *›He's in a family partnership and is about to become a father? ... When on earth did he manage that?‹* A dull feeling of dread rises within me. I realize I've suddenly developed a great deal of respect for Oliver.

Lost in thought, I gaze at the colorful evening sky and realize that I will soon be on my way. I also have the feeling that this journey will take me not only to Burkina Faso, but much deeper and further than I can currently imagine.

Oliver's experiences are very valuable, but they don't tell me anything about traveling by sea, and I'll probably need some more information about that. However I travel to Burkina Faso, part of the journey will definitely involve ships. I'll search for travel experiences on TransSocietyBoard. Strangely, the results from the notebooks are listed first. *›I'll have to reconfigure that...‹* I jot down for later. But the first entry sounds very interesting and, at the same time, somewhat strange.

> *June 9, 2039*
>
> *I'm so glad that the bees and many other insects have survived the bad weather of recent years. Without them, many of our crops would have to be pollinated manually. So, with the help of the bees, our fields and gardens are developing much better this summer than we expected. At the moment, mostly wild bees and a few other insects live here with us. But we're planning to establish more bee colonies so we can also include honey in our diet. There used to be a bee-keeper in the community, but he has since passed away. His equip-ment is still here, though, and I'd love to get involved with bees. It's just not so easy to find a bee colony, and it's even more complicated to bring it home unharmed.*
>
> *Another child has been born in the community – a boy named Wal-ter. At the same time, one of the young women sadly passed away from a pelvic infection. Our medical care, particularly regarding an-tibiotics, is still very poor. Medications are difficult to obtain, and not everything can be cured with knowledge of medicinal plants, even*

though Andrea, our herbalist, does everything she can to replace chemically produced medications with herbal remedies.

Personally, I see the natural workings of the shared equilibrium of all life at work in the events surrounding death and birth. I am very aware that we humans try to escape death through medical intervention, but in doing so, we also override the natural regulatory mechanisms. I feel we are deluding ourselves. Because even if we »cure« individuals who would otherwise have died, thereby suspending the natural regulatory effects of illness, we are merely shifting the imbalance to a higher level of natural change, where the reaction is even more dramatic. We are currently experiencing this on a planetary and species level. Therefore, while it is sad for me, it is not a bad thing when a person dies naturally. Because when life is in balance, for every human who dies, a new human is born somewhere on the planet…

The food security challenges that still exist in some regions of the world due to weather conditions are, in my view, part of the overall picture of the human species on this planet. I believe we must learn to see ourselves within this larger planetary context in order to recognize our role and responsibilities as a species.

The world population is currently estimated at approximately 2.8 billion people, according to global radio communications. Most of these people already live in subsistence-oriented communities, predominantly outside urban areas. Our monitoring group reports that only one community has been able to settle permanently in Karlsruhe; all other communities have left the city.

Noram, Jitu, and Frank were in Heidelberg to help set up another decentralized internet exchange point. There, in an abandoned house, which may had been the home of an amateur radio operator, they found a radio for Jitu. Noram had apparently noticed the house because of its highly visible radio antenna. Jitu, for his part, is preparing everything for his return trip to Burkina Faso. If all goes well, we will have a direct and stable radio connection with Jitu and the commu-

nity in Koti starting next year.

Sea travel became possible again in many coastal regions after the "major shore leave" of the military navy, although mostly only with small sailing vessels. Jitu has already gained extensive experience with this, as well as with land travel, which is possible again with great caution. If a significant detour is taken around the few remaining "feudal enclaves," travel is relatively safe again.

Jitu will accompany us all the way to Casablanca. His experience will certainly be very helpful to Noram and me, as we haven't traveled outside our region recently.

The organization of the first global in-person meeting of the communities in Morocco is progressing well, and I'm sometimes working on it late into the night. Communication is challenging, but progress is being made. The date, or rather the timeframe due to travel difficulties, is already set: the meeting is scheduled for the turn of the year 2039/40. Some of the participants living furthest away want to start their journey now already. Noram and I will probably leave in the fall so that we can arrive there in time.

Ethan points out that the world's population fifty years ago was almost four times what it is today. And he writes this after a period of profound transformation, during which at least twice as many people perished due to natural disasters and wars. I simply cannot imagine what life must have been like for almost nine billion people back then… and especially not how Ethan, indeed all the remaining humans, must have felt during that time. After all, as the entry describes, they had already entered the phase of rebuilding fifty years ago.

I'm slowly walking home. It will soon be dark. I won't read any more tonight, nor will I plan anything else for my trip. *›What good does it do me to know so much about what happened long before I was born and how people's lives changed back then...‹* It already feels very difficult for me to think about the full complexity of that transformation. On the other hand, I'm curious and also grateful. I do want to know how people really lived, thought, and felt back then. *›It's perhaps a great stroke of luck that Grandpa Jitu and Grandma Kyara are still alive. Maybe I can learn more from them...‹*

Only the office is still brightly lit in the house. I sneak unnoticed into the kitchen. The

refrigerator door squeaks slightly as I take something to eat. I'm glad I have my own room. I need sleep now.

Clarification with Ajola

Well-rested. Getting out of bed isn't so difficult today, and my mind isn't foggy. I can hear the murmur of breakfast coming from the kitchen. I sit down at the set table and poure myself a cup of tea. Leyla and Simon are still preparing something. Lares is chewing absently, a half-eaten slice of buttered bread in his hand.

"Good morning," I greet them quietly. "Did you sleep as well as I did last night?"

"Morning, Mika," Leyla replies without turning to me. "I spent half the night in the office preparing the plans for the next few weeks. The volunteers' schedules don't coordinate themselves. Will you be joining us for a few more of our shifts, offering advice and support? Or are you already off?"

"Oh, Mom, I'm actually already off," I hear myself say. "I still have a lot to organize for the trip, and I also want to say goodbye to Grandpa and some friends here. Oliver is taking over the pickthresher shift starting today. I arranged that with him yesterday."

"That was clever, my dear. I was worried you might let us down. But Oliver can definitely handle it. He knows what's important."

"Mika, I'm also visiting Grandpa Noram at the hospice again today. Should we go to Blankenloch together?" Simon asks, placing a small bowl of fruit salad on the table. "Here, for you boys! We've already eaten the rest," he says casually.

"I was just about to talk to Ajola about whether we could see each other briefly," I reply, taking a few grapes. "I'll sort it out right away, and then I'll know if we can go together, OK?" I add.

"Go ahead. I want to leave around noon; I still have things to do here in the late afternoon," Simon says and disappears into the living room.

I pop some more grapes into my mouth and go to my room to call Ajola on her communicator. Her voice sounds kind of annoyed.

„"Hi Mika, so you're getting in touch after all? When does your trip start? How long will it last? Why am I not hearing much?" she rattles off.

"So many questions at once? I don't have any quick answers. I suggest we meet

and discuss it privately..." I reply, a little embarrassed.

›Where is all this going to lead?‹ I don't want to hurt her or offend her. That much is certain. But I also have to admit that Ajola is giving me a lot of attention with her questions and her annoyance, which, on the other hand, I quite like.

"Okay, Mika. I'm almost on campus. If you come here, we can meet at the InterMod station and go for a walk in the park." Her voice sounds a little stressed. She's being very assertive again.

"Yes, that works. But I won't be able to get to campus for another two hours. The next InterMod bus doesn't leave for another hour. Will you be here that long?"

"Yes, I can manage that! But please come!"

The crackling sound tells me that she has hung up and I have a feeling that our conversation will not be so easy.

“Simon, I’m not coming to Grandpa’s after all; I’m meeting up with Ajola,” I call to my father across the hall.

“You have to know what you’re doing…” my father smiles, now unexpectedly standing in the doorway again. “But don’t get carried away. Being in love can play some nasty tricks on us.”

“In love? I don’t know,” I reply, “but I feel like I have to be careful with her, or rather, cautious. I like Ajola a lot, but right now I don’t know if I’m ready for a long-term commitment. I’m practically leaving already. I’ve got a serious case of wanderlust, and I feel that my upcoming departure is very important to me right now.”

“Yes, exactly, and completely understandable at your age… and if Ajola feels the same way about you, I think you should say so clearly. Especially if you want to be considerate with her.”

“Thank you, I’ll try to follow your advice. Let’s see how it goes.”

“You can let me know how it goes, I’m curious now too,” Simon smiles and then disappeared.

I watch him thoughtfully as he walks through the garden towards the street and disappears behind the elderberry bushes. I gather my things and walk slowly to the InterMod station. I still have to wait a while for the bus to campus. My head is full of thoughts I don't want to have right now.

I pull out my communicator and absentmindedly browse through my great-grandfa-

ther's notebook entries. I'm aware that I'm only trying to distract myself, but at the same time, I'm also curious. I search for »education« and »science«. *›It's rather chilly today...‹* I remark, and sit down on the wooden bench in the waiting hut. Here I'm sheltered from the wind.

June 27, 2025

I am speechless. I could never have imagined that internationally documented truth would play no role in Germany, and that facts would be so blatantly misused for subjective interpretation and arbitrary manipulation. I am writing this down so that I never forget that something like this is possible.

On June 12, 2025, during negotiations between the US and Iran regarding Iran's nuclear program, Israel attacks Iran without any provocation, thus torpedoing the negotiations. Iran retaliates by bombing Israeli territory. On June 22, 2025, also without any provocation, the US attacks Iran's underground nuclear facilities with bunker-buster bombs. In response, Iran bombs the US base in Qatar, which had been evacuated beforehand and sustains only minor damage. No US soldiers are injured. On June 25, 2025, Trump announces the end of the "12-Day War" between Israel and Iran. Today, June 27, 2025, the official narrative in German online media has been "corrected" in a complete reversal of the truth: "Iran's war against Israel!!! has shaken the power structure in Tehran." All official channels are reporting – the biased reporting of the leading Western media knows no bounds!!! Meanwhile, nobody in the West is talking about the ongoing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza anymore…

Constantly getting worked up about the different standards currently used by Western powers is wearing me down. I have a massive sense of powerlessness. Adina isn't doing any better, even though she seems to be able to handle it somewhat better, or at least that's what she claims…

Those critical voices in online media are surprised that the outcry of outraged citizens, which one would expect given the current socio-

economic situation, is still absent. Unfortunately, I'm no longer surprised. Who is left to speak out? My father's generation is being pushed to the sidelines by the current political and economic climate, practically driven out of active life. My generation was seduced by smartphones and tablets in their twenties, and the generations that come after us know the world only through apps, since they are expected to spend their entire lives on smartphones and live only that way… Schools, like all areas of life, are currently being forcibly digitized. »Artificial intelligence« is already being touted in companies as a »tool of the future«, whose widespread adoption is »inevitable«. Even now, in large corporations, human contact between HR departments and employees, or job applicants, has been almost entirely replaced by AI chatbots and AI-driven online processes. The »evangelists« of AI adoption counter critics who urge caution by pointing out that the fear during the Industrial Revolution—that machines and automation would destroy many human jobs—has also proven »unfounded«. They argue that many new jobs were created as a result, and that the labor market crisis predicted in connection with technological progress would not have materialized. What they fail to mention is that adapting to the new technologies and job requirements took at least a generation. Few, if any, of the adults of the first generation who lost their jobs due to the introduction of machines were able to benefit from the »newly created jobs«. The forced implementation of AI, driven solely by greed, since minimizing personnel costs is one of the main objectives, will have similar consequences. Yes, people will have to adapt, but at least one generation will lose their livelihood, and nobody in political or trade union circles is talking about that.

The worst situation, however, is within the so-called »education system«. Not only has the Bologna Process turned studying into rote memorization of neoliberal economic ideology over the past 15 years, but the »digitisation of schools« is now in full swing. AI is supposed to »support« teaching, which means that teachers are allowed —or in reality, even required—to use ChatGPT and other apps for

lesson planning and implementation, and that students are allowed—or in fact, required—to use AI-tools for help with their schoolwork. The very few skeptical voices that warn that the indiscriminate use of AI is actually leading to the atrophy of young people's critical thinking skills are, at best, simply ignored. At worst, these inconvenient critics are marginalized, defamed as »anti-progress«, and ultimately eliminated.

The impact of artificial intelligence on the thinking and learning abilities of the human brain is catastrophic. What is not used atrophies. AI also has the potential to do much good for humanity, but it will only be able to realize this potential if the intention behind its development is not solely driven by the profit and lust for power of a select few… today's power brokers and decision-makers, the self-appointed political and economic elite, seem intent on making critical questioning impossible for the majority of people. This works seamlessly when even children learn to let AI do their thinking for them and internalize this as "normal." An older generation is being lost, but a new generation is already being trained by AI…

August 30, 2041

Today, we received some very joyful news at our radio meeting: The military garrison of the former German internet hub in Frankfurt am Main is laying down its arms and granting all communities access to technology. The communities in the Kinzig Valley are the first to have been contacted personally by the soldiers. The messengers explained that their decision was a result of observing developments in the immediate vicinity. They said that they now see that the people have established a new, good life and want to become part of that life themselves.

Our contacts emphasized that, naturally, the initial reaction was to regard the soldiers with considerable suspicion. However, only three soldiers arrived completely unarmed and brought with them some medications that are currently extremely difficult to obtain, which they simply handed over to the community unconditionally. The soldiers

responded calmly and openly to the many questions that immediately arose. They honestly admitted that the collapse of military structures worldwide was certainly a strong motivation for their actions. They assured us that the command structures had been dissolved and the command elite stripped of power, partly even by the officers' own conviction, as one of the visitors repeatedly emphasized. He himself was one of the officers. Following the discussion, they invited the community to the technical facilities and proposed an ongoing dialogue with the already established communities in the Frankfurt region for the purpose of integration and cooperation. They requested that their offer be publicized to all involved parties through existing channels.

The conclusion reached by the people of Kinzigtal was that while they were very impressed by the soldiers' actions, they were still approaching the situation with caution. A visit to the facilities in Frankfurt is currently being planned, and they are also inviting representatives from other neighboring communities to participate in evaluating the new situation. I have a feeling that this might also mean a trip to Frankfurt for Noram. I can't even begin to imagine what the commissioning of this internet hub will mean for regional and even global communication.

I sincerely hope that other military installations, in Australia, the USA, China, and elsewhere, will follow this example. With caution and foresight, these changes could be observed and supported by the surrounding communities. That would be good for all of humanity…

This would provide crucial support, especially for disseminating necessary knowledge. Adina and I are now giving a lot of thought to the education of young people who will have to start school now. How can everything be organized in such a way that the knowledge already gained can be meaningfully integrated? The learning centers, which currently only exist in our imaginations, must become, even in their physical design, places where young people enjoy spending time and feel encouraged to study independently. Places that are

globally networked and conduct exchange and cooperation programs that allow young people to gain their own practical experience and support the natural process of learning and development.

We need to move away from rote learning with subsequent exams, certificates, diplomas and titles, towards lifelong, self-directed learning for the purpose of self-knowledge and conscious participation in one's own social context.

I understand that this won't be an easy task, and that many years will have to pass before results become truly visible. But I have a deep feeling that now is the time to begin laying a suitable foundation. I don't yet have a truly clear plan, and neither does Adina. But thankfully, we're not alone. There are so many other people in the world who are thinking about this just like we are. For this, we need a good network, and, as it seems from today onward, the technical prerequisites for good communication and cooperation are slowly improving.

The last sentence I read made me thoughtful. As did everything I've just read. *›What a difference in Ethan's mood in just, how many now, sixteen years?...‹* I can't possibly imagine what the world must have been like back then, before the Transformation, if my great-grandfather wrote something like that. The »wars« he mentions are very disturbing to me, as they obviously were to him as well. I can hardly think about it, I realize. Finally, from my perspective, I can't really understand his thoughts and concerns about the use of digital media and artificial intelligence either, because for me, a »malicious intent« from which this useful functionality was developed back then is inconceivable.

The bus lurches slightly, and I involuntarily glance outside. *›It's not far until I have to get off...‹* To the left and right of the connecting road, I see only the forest, which in recent years has almost completely surrounded the learning campus. Most of the trees are still relatively young, and the forest is therefore still very dense with their slender trunks. *›It smells like autumn...‹* The bus stops with a slight squeak. *›They should take another look at it in the garage,‹* I think absently as I get off. The door closes with a soft whir, and the bus pulls away. The wind isn't blowing so strongly here. Ajola probably isn't at the stop yet, like she said. I walk a few steps further into the main campus avenue and sit down on the first park bench under an old oak tree.

Thoughts about preparing for the trip quickly take over again. It must have been quite some time. Ajola's voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

"Where are your thoughts, Mika? I've been standing here for a while and you haven't even noticed me..."

She doesn't sound angry, but rather sad. Her eyes look at me questioningly, and I don't know what to say. She's right, I hadn't even noticed her, and yet I feel a deep inner joy when I look at her.

“Sorry,” I start hesitantly, “I'm already on the journey with my thoughts ... and I wanted to tell you something about that.”

Ajola's face flushes and her eyes sparkle in a way that sends shivers down my spine. A feeling of warmth washes over me, but words fail me. I don't know what to discuss with her, because I'm quite certain I can't tell her what I suspect she wants to hear.

"Hello? Mika? Are you speechless?" she says in a voice so soft that I can't help myself and hug her without warning. "Hey," she replies, still clinging to me, "please let go and finally tell me what you're planning and when, don't you think?"

I loosen my hug a little and try to speak in a confident voice, like a grown man, which I obviously am not yet.

“Ajola, I already told you everything, didn’t I? You remember our last conversation…”

“Yes, but that’s not enough for me… is that all you have to say to me? That you’re going to Burkina Faso for many months? Is that really all?”

Suddenly, our embrace feels a little too close, a space filled with so many unspoken words. I let go of her and take a step towards the park entrance.

"What do you expect from me? What else can I say?" I ask her softly. "No, it's not everything, but I don't know what to say or how to tell you. We've known each other for so long, and it's still somewhat unexpected that you're asking me like this... there's something there that I hadn't planned for... and honestly, I don't really know how to deal with it..."

She's still standing rooted to the spot in front of the old oak tree, just staring at me. Her blue-green eyes are sparkling and her cheeks seem to be on fire. Mine kind of are too. *›Man...!‹*

"Come on, please let's take a few steps," I whisper. "Maybe we can talk better

then..."

I extend my hand and she takes it in hers so naturally, as if she had been waiting for just that.

“Yes,” I hear her whisper as she takes a step towards me, “let’s go for a walk and maybe we’ll both find the right words…”

My gaze wanders restlessly along the alley, trying to find hold on each tree. I don't want to have to say a word. What I feel inside is so contradictory that I have a need to find something solid nearby. Something that doesn't move. The old oaks and chestnut trees that line the alleys all over campus are currently my best friends. We're circling the vast wildflower meadow, around which the old buildings of the learning campus huddle together like a circle. There's the »short« and the »long« side of the main alley. The »long« side leads to almost all the campus buildings and thus encircles the central meadow before reaching the cafeteria. The »short« side, which we're walking on now, is an almost straight line from the InterMod station, right through the middle of the field, directly towards the cafeteria, leaving the central wildflower meadow to our right. It's the solitary side of the alley. Autumn is clearly visible in the wildflower meadow. Many of the plants are old, and some are already withered. *›How time flies...‹* I think, and come back to the present.

We walk for a while in silence. Our hands are clasped so tightly that it even seems too much to me. But I don't want to let go, and I know she doesn't either.

“I’ll come back,” I hear myself say.

“When?” she asks.

“Afterwards, when I’m finished…”

“Yes, I know,” she replies, “but will you come back to me then?”

›Uff...‹ I can't answer that question right now because I have no idea what to expect and I don't want to make promises I might not be able to keep.

“Why is this so important to you?” I ask, even though I already suspect the answer.

“Because it’s important to me,” she whispers softly. “Isn’t it important to you at all?”

“Yes,” I reply, “but obviously differently than it is to you, right? I can tell there’s something about this that touches you… and me too… but I want to be free to leave, and I have the feeling that you don’t want me to leave. Why?”

Ajola's eyes speak volumes. Yet not a sound comes from her mouth. She snuggles

against me, and I can feel her heart beating. I know what she's trying to tell me. I don't know, however, if I truly want to hear it. We continue walking, huddled close together. Words have become superfluous. A dove flutters frantically in front of us. *›It should be so easy...‹* I have no experience with saying goodbye. I've never been away from home. I've never had to say goodbye to anyone. All my trips have been no longer than a few days. *›How can I leave without hurting her?‹* a thought crumbles onto the stony path beneath our feet.

“I’m not holding you back…” I hear Ajola’s voice. “I just want you to know that I want to wait for you as long as I can… you know, I’m also ready to go on my journey and it could be a long time before we see each other again…”

›And why do I get this lump in my throat?‹

"You're leaving too? When? You haven't mentioned that at all," I hear an uncertain voice ask.

I feel panicked, stop, and turn to her.

"Tell me, is that true? Or are you just trying to unsettle me?"

Ajola's eyes glitter in the midday sun and she smiles mischievously.

"Oh, now you're suddenly back! Did you get scared, dear Mika? Is what happens to me important to you after all?"

Her words tug at my self-esteem somewhat, but I sense that she's just playing an old game with me, one we used to play again and again as children. I play along.

“Oh, come on, no, I’m just asking because it’s so sudden and I was planning to do the same…” I try to even the score. Deep down, though, I know my voice is giving me away. “It’s good that you’re leaving too,” I start again, but the words catch in my throat.

Ajola stands before me, looks deep, deep into my eyes, and smiles. I have to smile too, and she raises her arms and pulls me down to her until our faces are very close. I feel her voice so clearly inside me, as if it were my own.

"Will you come back to me, or not?"

Her breath touches my cheek, and the scent of her skin intoxicates me. *›Odysseus...‹* a mischievous thought flickers, and I hear myself gasp deeply. I bury my face in the crook of her neck, tasting the salt on her slightly sweaty skin. I'm trembling. So is she. *›And now?‹* She pulls away, presses her mouth to mine, and then takes two steps

back, my hands in hers.

"Mika? Say something!"

›The boss is back.‹ She always had that tone in her voice when we were children, whenever she believed she was in control of a situation. But now it's different. Now we're not children anymore, and she's not in control. I like her a lot, but what she expects from me is more than I'm willing to give... *›To give? ... To be? ... To become?‹* I pull her close again and whisper in her ear:

“Ajola, I will come back and when you are there, we will see what awaits us both.”

Her breath catches, and I feel her body tense. She remains pressed against me, but she's cold. The same coldness I'd noticed in her before, whenever she couldn't get exactly what she wanted. One more breath, and she turns away. Her eyes are dull. She looks away, down. Her voice is cold.

“You’ll know what you’re doing. I only asked you because you mean something to me and I like you. But don’t get any ideas that I kissed you. We’ve done that before. It doesn’t mean anything.” She turns away, her fists clenched. I take a step toward her.

“Ajola…”

“No, leave me alone. I think everything’s been said.”

A look over the shoulder.

"Perhaps you could come by again before you leave, to say a proper goodbye? Like old friends should?"

I put a hand on her shoulder, but she keeps turning away.

“No, I said. I have to go now. Take care!”

I stay and watch her hurry towards InterMod. *›What have I done?‹* And yet, surprisingly, I feel lighter, as if a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders. *›Was I considerate of her?‹*

My communicator beeps softly in my pocket. It's my mother. Something must have happened if she's calling. I need to go home now. And that suits me just fine. I feel light, and that feels good. Something ended today, and something else is gaining the strength to sprout into life.

The Grandparents in Burkina Faso

I close the window. A cool evening breeze blows in, and I feel a slight chill. The sky is gray and gloomy. It looks like it might rain soon. I sit down on the bed and turn my attention back to the communicator. I'm still not managing to plan the trip the way I'd like. Someone knocks briefly, and the door opens a crack.

"Well, Mika..." I hear Leyla's voice. "I need to talk to you," she says, standing in the doorway, waiting.

II don't really feel like talking to her. I'm quite busy right now and annoyed that the details of the trip are so difficult to sort out. I glance at her briefly without saying anything.

“I had a video call from Grandma Kyara and Grandpa Jitu today,” she begins. “They finally want to know approximately when you’ll arrive. After all, they want to plan how they’ll welcome you. I think they’re both a little nervous about it.”

›And now this...‹

"Oh Mom, I'm completely overwhelmed right now. I'll get back to you later today once I have the list of stopovers and transfers," I say somewhat dismissively, awkwardly trying to change the subject. "How did the... harvest go? Is everything sorted out?"

My mother looks at me calmly for a moment, as if unsure how to respond to my answer. She does, however, address my question, and I'm grateful for that. I can't talk about it right now and realize I need to sort some things out for myself before I can answer any questions. I pretend to be working very intently with my communication device, just so I don't have to look her in the eye.

"Yes, Mika, everything went very well," I hear her voice say. She sits down behind me in my office chair and plays along. "The weather, the equipment, and the people all worked together perfectly. Only the solar panels on the equipment shed got damaged in the last storm. Oliver and Simon are taking care of that right now."

"But you'll manage without me, right?" I interject, uninterested.

"Yes, yes... You take care of your travel preparations and, if all goes well, visit Grandpa Noram again before you leave," she cuts me off firmly this time and stands up again.

That's just how she is. I've never been able to fool her. I have a sinking feeling in my

stomach right now. My behavior obviously isn't going down very well with her.

“Yes, I will do that,” I murmur somewhat embarrassed, and continue stubbornly turning to my communicator.

Now she's gone, and I'm glad about that. I take a deep breath. I'm starting to get restless. Whether I like it or not, I have to somehow manage to plan this trip properly. *›This is driving me crazy,‹* I think after more attempts with the MultiMod. The trip planner is currently calculating two alternative routes from the African coast to Burkina Faso. With a two-week difference between the two arrival dates. *›I can't give my grandparents any definite details.‹* I don't know what to do. Leyla's right. No matter how or when I get there, I should at least give them a call and let them know that it's happening soon.

I dial and the connection is established. It sometimes takes a little longer to reach this region. I remember reports coming in the other day that some relays had failed. This means that communication is being rerouted, which naturally results in delays.

"Hello, Grandma Kyara, how are you? Is Grandpa Jitu here too?" I ask the somewhat shaky video image in my communicator.

"Hello, dear Mika, it's so nice to hear from you!"

Grandma smiles. Her voice sounds a bit tinny through the universal translator. But communication is working better than I expected.

“Jitu is in the garden, wait, I’ll get him…”, can be heard.

Now all I can see on my monitor is the large tapestry in their living room. I'm curious to see how they've decorated and how I'll be accommodated there. There's a rustling sound, and the murmur of voices is slowly growing louder. They both beam at me.

"Mika, how you are?" Grandpa Jitu beams at me from the screen. "How are you finally going to come and visit us?"

II am always amazed by Grandpa Jitu's excellent German pronunciation. He was in Europe only for a few years back then, but still learned a great deal of our language and has managed to retain it to this day.

“Oh, it’s so lovely to see you both…” I begin hesitantly. “So you already know I’m planning to visit you… I wanted to let you know my arrival time. Unfortunately, I can’t be precise yet. All I can say from today’s point on is that I could arrive in Accra, Ghana, in six weeks at the earliest, or perhaps even later. After that, it will still take

me a while to get to you in Koti.”

“That’s understandable,” Jitu begins. “I traveled a lot; it not always been easy.”

He laughs loudly at himself.

"No matter how long it takes, the main thing is that you arrive safe and sound," says Grandma Kyara, gently putting her arms around Jitu.

"I can see you two love each other very much! I hope my presence doesn't bother you..." I say, touched by their hug, and giggle with amusement.

"Tell me, Mika, what exactly are you doing in that project in Gorom-Gorom?" Jitu asks in perfect German, and I realize they've actually turned on the universal translator.

I remember that it was always an issue in the past, as Grandpa Jitu believed that the universal translator would not convey his thoughts as he actually intended them.

“And could you bring me some of that special fabric? Leyla knows what I’m talking about. Our ClothBot can’t make it, unfortunately, but Leyla knows where to get it…” Kyara interjects.

“And could you help me with the pump? It just won’t run all the time, and I’m constantly having to fix it…” Jitu adds.

“Hold on! Stop! I can’t answer all the questions at once,” I reply with a smile, raising my hands to symbolically ward off the demands. “But I’ll help you wherever I can,” I assure them both. “I’ve written down all your questions. If there’s anything else, please just send it all to me via the communicator. I’ll take a look at everything and get back to you. And Grandpa: Yes! When I’m with you in Koti, I’ll check on the pump too.”

They both smile and nod at me understandingly. I'm sure Grandpa Jitu doesn't really need help with the pump, but I'm happy to play along. *›Kyara and Jitu make a lovely couple... and after so many years together...‹* I think suddenly. *›Will I ever be in such a wonderful relationship?‹*

"Mika, please keep us updated during your trip. That way we can plan your arrival flexibly and prepare everything for a wonderful family celebration. Your aunts and uncles and their families are even more eager to meet you than we are, and the easiest way to do that is during a big party," Kyara explains.

"What can I do to help make the family celebration a success?" I ask, a little uncer-

tainly. "I don't really plan on traveling with much luggage..."

"Oh, Mika, it's enough if you just come to us, celebrate with us, and share a few stories about Leyla, Simon, Lares, and yourself," Jitu reassures me. "How is Noram? Please give him our warmest regards when you see him."

"Noram is still doing relatively well. He's currently in the hospital. I'll gladly pass on your greetings when I visit him next time before I leave."

We just look at each other for a few seconds. I realize that everything has already been said and I can't think of anything else to add. Feeling that I'm ending too abruptly, I say in a slightly quieter voice:

"Yes, of course, I'll do that. I'll keep you updated on my trip from the road. I'm already looking forward to seeing you both again and meeting everyone else."

"Have a good trip, Mika, arrive safely," came the synchronized voice from my speaker, and the connection ended.

›I've somehow run out of words these past few days... is that possible?‹ a thought flits through my mind. I get up and go out. There's no one in the kitchen. Leyla is sitting in the study, happily working away. *›Mom needs this work, just as the work needs her. Who else would organize it?‹* It's my turn now to speak to her from the doorway.

"Grandma Kyara wants me to bring her some of a rare fabric that the ClothBot apparently can't produce yet, or at least not in the quality she wants. Do you know what she means?"

"Hmm, she probably means Kente. That's a bit of a problem, though," my mother muses thoughtfully. "I only have a few meters of this Kente fabric made of natural silk left. The ClothBot should be able to produce it perfectly, but somehow it can't manage it..." Leyla complains.

"Aha, that's a case for Bettina!" Lares chimes in, appearing beside me as if from nowhere.

"Since when does teleportation work?" I ask Lares. "And why haven't they built in any safety mechanisms to prevent misdeliveries?"

We both laugh, amused. Leyla smiles somewhat irritatedly, but finaly joins in.

“Bettina, one of my girlfriends, has dedicated herself to textile science on campus. As far as I know, she scans the original fabrics three-dimensionally and records their chemical and structural properties. Then she feeds the ClothBot with the raw data.

The initial results are quite promising so far," reports Lares.

I can't resist.

"Mom, did you hear that? He says »one of my girlfriends«!"

Lares pushes me away and shows me his fist behind our mother's back.

"Then I'll give you a sample," says Leyla, as if she hadn't heard anything. She can't quite hide her mischievous smile, though. "Perhaps you could ask Bettina to analyze this Kente fabric and create some initial tissue samples? I know a lot of people who would be thrilled if Kente could be reproduced in the ClothBot," Lares is asked very seriously.

She rummages through a bundle of fabrics in the closet and hands him a small, colorful piece, which Lares makes disappear into his shoulder bag.

"Sure thing, Mom, I'll do it!" he replies, slightly out of breath, and then disappears as quickly as he had appeared.

Leyla and I exchange a slightly puzzled glance and both shake our heads. Lares seems preoccupied with something that we, the others, aren't necessarily supposed to know, but which should be obvious to everyone. My conversation with Grandma Kyara is still very much on my mind, and something continues to worry me.

"Kyara and Jitu want to throw a family party for my arrival. I don't really know how to handle it or how to prepare for it…," I say to my mother.

She laughs and strokes my head.

"Just be yourself, and my family will take you to their hearts," she says in a warm voice. "Our family gatherings are legendary; there's lots of talking, eating, and dancing. And you can dance, my dear Mika. It was to be expected that they'd throw such a party for you. Of course, not just for you. There are many reasons why a family gathering might take place. No one there knows you personally, not even your grandparents, and one of the customs is that a young man your age is officially welcomed into the community through such a celebration," she finishes with a smile.

"Yes, yes," I reply, embarrassed. *›Man, what must I look like if my mother feels compelled to say something like that to me!‹* "I know all that. I'm not afraid of that, but rather of their expectations of me…"

"Mika, please believe me, your fears are unfounded. On the other hand, I unfortunately can't tell you everything that will happen there, because this is a very personal

experience. I can only assure you that it will be a joyful experience and certainly unforgettable."

Leyla looks deep into my eyes, and I'm profoundly moved by what she's just told me. It becomes clear to me how important my trip is for my mother and her family in Burkina Faso. This gives the whole undertaking a new dimension I hadn't anticipated. To all the curiosity and longing that are drawing me to this journey, there's now a certain pride that seems to give me strength.

Traveling by Land

A Final Talk with Grandpa Noram

The InterMod bus is half full. I sit in the back to get some peace and quiet. The trip to Blankenloch to visit Grandpa Noram is a good opportunity to review the project description again. It's a very interesting project. Due to water scarcity and poor soil, the aim is to protect natural resources and maintain agricultural yields. Irrigation wells will ensure the cultivation of gardens, so that sufficient food can be grown during the dry season in the Sahel. The pumping systems will be powered by photovoltaic panels, and the network of water retention basins will be expanded. Transparent photovoltaic panels will be used, allowing vegetation to thrive underneath them, thus minimizing land use. *›And these panels still have to be delivered from France...‹* I realize. Finding details is difficult. I find very little information about this solar panel system on MultiNet. There's no information about its internal structure or on-site processing. *›An ambitious project to implement these new solar panels and create a functional system.‹*

The bus driver announces the stop at the hospital. Time has flown by. It takes me a moment for my eyes to adjust from the screen to the bright light outside. I manage to stagger off the bus. The bus driver looks at me, somewhat surprised. He probably recognized me and wonders if I'm alright. I wave to him to let him know that everything is fine.

The front door is hidden around a bend in the path. I walk through the entrance hall to Grandpa's room. I hesitate a little before opening the door. I'm not quite sure what to say to him.

“Hello Grandpa, how are you today?” I hear myself say in a trembling voice.

Grandpa Noram sits on his bed, gazing absently out the window. His eyes are dull and watery. He doesn't respond to my greeting. I move closer to the bed, place my hand on his arm, and wait for a reaction. As if in slow motion, he turns his head toward me, trying to find me. Finally, our eyes meet, and a faint smile appears on his face.

"You here? Mika?" he stammers, more surprised than frightened. "Good to see

you."

"Grandpa, you were lost in your thoughts just now. What were you seeing?" I ask him, to buy myself some time.

"Oh, Mika, I'm looking back on my life and trying to see beyond the end. But I can't..."

Noram is completely exhausted, as I can tell from his voice.

"Grandpa, do you need any help? Would you like some water or tea?" I ask him anxiously, pressing the call button on the care assistant system. "If you'd rather sleep, I'll come visit you another time," I say immediately.

"No, no, everything is fine, and please stay. I'm so glad to see you, Mika. It feels good to have you by my side. How are your travel preparations coming along?"

I'm still hesitant to speak openly with him about my departure. I have a feeling it might be too much.

"I discussed my arrival with Kyara and Jitu. They both send their regards. So it will be starting soon," I say, my voice a little husky.

The door opens and a young nurse sticks his head into the room. He asks curiously and kindly:

"I'm Olaf. How can I help you?"

"I think Noram needs something," I murmur uncertainly.

"No, I don't need anything," Noram replies. "But since you're here, Olaf, please bring me some herbal tea. Thank you!"

"My pleasure," says the nursing assistant, quietly closing the door.

“Kyara and Jitu… I’d love to see them both again, but I probably won’t have the time…” Noram says, his eyes becoming slightly more focused. “During the Transformation, I traveled a lot in Germany with Jitu when we were looking for a radio for Koti. That was long before he married Kyara.” His gaze shifts back and forth, as if he can see what he’s describing behind me, on the wall. “There was a lot to start from scratch back then, here and there. We were both involved, individually and together… I can say that we became friends. I would love to say goodbye to him and Kyara in person, but I’m afraid I won’t get the chance. It’s good that you’re going there now. You can give them my regards and a big hug from me.”

“Shall we call them? You can still talk to Jitu and Kyara in person. That’s possible,

isn’t it, even if you can’t hug each other?” I suggest. I don’t understand why Grandpa didn’t think of that himself.

“No, no, you know, I helped set up all these systems back then, in the beginning… but with this electronics, it’s not the same. You can’t really feel the person, touch them, smell them, know how they’re doing… and I’ve become so weak now… I don’t want them to remember me like that.”

His voice flickers at first and gets weaker with each word.

“No,” he repeats quietly, “we spoke a few years ago when I was much better. That’s how I want them to remember me.”

“We can talk on the phone without video, they don’t need to see you…” I insist, shaking my head inwardly.

“Oh, Mika, Jitu knows me so well that he’d immediately recognize from my voice that I’m not doing very well, and since he wouldn’t see me, he’d just worry unnecessarily. No. Thank you for thinking of that, but my decision is final. And so is my request to you. Will you do this for me, please?”

“Of course I will. It’s just that I think they’ll ask me exactly that, I mean, why you didn’t call them to tell them everything yourself…”

"No, Jitu won't ask that, I'm sure of it... he'll know."

Olaf brings in a tray with a teapot and cup.

"Here's the tea, please. Careful, it's still hot. I just brewed it," he said in a low voice.

"Thank you..." Noram murmured weakly.

Grandpa's eyes suddenly stare sharply at me, and for the first time I have the feeling that he's really looking at me. His question isn't unexpected either.

"When are you leaving? When does it start?" he asks after Olaf has left the room.

"Very soon..." I say, a lump in my throat preventing me from continuing. I realize this will probably be our last conversation. "I'm just finalizing the travel arrangements, planning the route, deciding what to take and what to leave behind, saying goodbye... that's actually why I'm here..." I manage to say before my voice breaks.

"I figured that must be one of the reasons you're visiting me again so soon. It's only been a few days since you were last here, hasn't it?"

"Not quite, Grandpa, it's actually been weeks, but it feels like just a few days to me

too. So much has happened lately. Time has flown by. We're almost finished with the harvest, too..."

"Aha," Grandpa shakes his head. "You see, I hardly notice how time passes here anymore. I was sure we were just talking two or three days ago, and you were telling me about my father's notebooks... that's right, isn't it?"

"That's right, Grandpa, that's right! You told me a great deal back then, and I've read even more since then. I showed you the files, too, but I'm afraid you can't read much now, can you?"

„“I can’t read anymore, but I could have it read to me. The people who care for me have suggested that before. But I don’t want to be read to anymore. I have my own memories, and I’m occupied with them most of the time. You know, I’m trying to figure out if I’ve lived a right life…”

“What do you mean, Grandpa? Is it possible to live a life that isn’t right?”

“Oh yes, Mika, it is. Especially for someone who thinks they know everything and can control everything. I’m examining whether I’ve sometimes been that kind of person and trying to find out if I’ve harmed other people or beings. It’s too late to change or correct anything anyway, but if someone ever asks me what I did and why, I at least want to know what they’re talking about.”

“I don’t understand…” I say, confused.

"You will in time, my dear Mika, you will, I am sure of it..."

I don't know why, but what Grandpa says to me, what he talks about, unsettles me somewhat. Because he's mostly talking to himself, which kind of scares me. And yet, paradoxically, it's not a fear I'm afraid of, but one that makes me curious about what I don't yet know and what still lies ahead.

“I also read a few notes on political and social conditions, but I couldn’t understand much,” I changed the subject. “Money, in particular, seems to have played a major role back then.”

“Yes, money was a very sensitive issue, but reading the notebooks will give you a lot of insight into the past, including the history of money. Ethan certainly noted down the important milestones of social transformation…”

Noram's voice trails off. He closes his eyes and falls asleep immediately. Our conversation must have been very tiring for him. I kiss him on the forehead and leave

the room. In the hospice's entrance area, I see Olaf and ask him to check on Noram again later.

I walk slowly to the InterMod station. A cold wind is blowing. I take my sweater out of my backpack and put it on. There are still a few minutes until the bus arrives. The communicator shows no delays. I switch to the results list of my last search for the keyword »money«. The topic was obviously very important to my great-grandfather. He wrote quite a bit about it. I had already read some of it on the way to Blankenloch. *›And I didn't really understand much of it...‹* But there's one more entry marked as »unread«.

> *July 15, 2032*
>
> *I dodged a bullet again. Apparently, the powerful in Silicon Valley care about keeping telecommunications working in Europe, because otherwise they can't effectively spread their narratives to further worsen the political situation! I'm furious! Half my colleagues are gone, and I'm expected to cower and do even more... But I'm still better off than many others, aren't I?*
>
> *Noram came back today very agitated. TU Darmstadt has closed its doors; it can't maintain operations without regular electricity supplies. All energy is now going to vital infrastructure. We still have electricity, phone, and internet, but for how much longer?*
>
> *Jitu got in touch from Burkina Faso – he arrived safely. Zanga seems to be doing well too. They still have electricity because Jitu got a small solar power system. We need to do that here as well – I absolutely have to discuss that with Noram.*
>
> *Adina is making good progress with the garden. Noram will be able to help her more now. When will it be my turn to help? I read on Telegram that in other parts of the world, in some areas, the energy supply is simply being cut off for "cost reasons"—this is now leading to massive unrest, which the state can only counter with the help of the police and the army. In the USA and Central America, the already very fragile energy grid is collapsing. Large parts of the population in metropolitan areas are now also without electricity. Almost*

all US citizens are armed and are using violence to obtain resources, water, and electricity.

A union protest is scheduled for tomorrow on the Zeil in Frankfurt. We plan to go, although I'm worried that there will be unrest and that the police won't hold back.

This entry isn't directly about money, but rather about the impact that, if I understand correctly, the absence of money had on people's lives. The topic of "money" remains very unclear to me. I have read that people used to interact differently. They had a shared agreement about »money« to make their economic relationships easier to manage. But why they had to fight each other simply because this agreement suddenly disappeared remains a mystery to me. It's extremely strange to me that the right to life was even linked to people having to possess something that existed only in their imagination. Furthermore, this idea was imposed on everyone else by a small, but apparently very influential, minority.

The hum of the bus interrupts my thoughts. The communicator disappears into my bag. I don't yet know the bus driver, a young man not much older than me. We greet each other. The bus is almost full, as usual.

Walzbachtal - Colmar

Day of Departure

›Why is Colmar train station so deserted? Is nobody taking the MultiMod towards Lyon?‹ So far, since the start of my journey, there have been loads of people getting on and off. Father said there should be quite a few people traveling because of harvest time. He seems to have been wrong.

An appetizing aroma wafts from the food package Leyla handed me as she said goodbye. My stomach rumbles, reminding me that I didn't really eat breakfast. I couldn't. I was too excited, and so was Lares. He'd stayed overnight at his girlfriend's and arrived just as I was about to leave. We only managed a quick hug, and I felt my

little brother tremble slightly. *›He's not so little anymore,‹* I think, and I smile as his grinning face appears before my mind's eye. *›No, he's not so little at all anymore, Lares...‹*

I find the MultiMod on platform 4. It's a relatively long train, with ten additional freight cars of various types stretching well beyond the station. I've never seen such a long train before. Most trains that run between our communities consist of a power car, which also has room for passengers, and a maximum of five freight cars. This train has a separate electric locomotive, which appears to be very old. However, it has been repainted and is still in very good condition. It's obvious that the routes MultiMod trains travel are much longer than the local routes I'm familiar with. I wonder how the communities involved in running the train manage the staffing. I haven't looked into that at all.

A few meters from the open door of the passenger car that follows directly behind the locomotive, several people are standing and talking in hushed voices. One of them might be the driver, I suspect. I'd like to ask him for details, but the group is too engrossed in their conversation. At least it seems that some people have already boarded. *›So I won't be traveling south on a ghost train,‹* I tell myself as I step into the still almost empty car. According to the communicator, I now have five hours until the next transfer. I settle into a four-seater. The aroma of my packed lunch practically compels me to open it. I don't yet know what's inside. Leyla had already prepared it when we said goodbye. Before I've even laid it out on the small table, the train has already started moving. *›It's really starting now... what was that line from that old Tolkien fairy tale? If I take one more step now, I'll be further away than I've ever been in my life? Man! And all I can think about is food! Is that normal?‹* I have to chuckle at myself. Apparently, I'm so moved by what I'm experiencing that hunger is the only possible way to express it.

The MultiMod track runs alongside dense forests that begin just beyond the former city of Colmar. The train hasn't reached its full speed. I can still clearly make out the old suburban buildings among the trunks of the beech forest. They are all abandoned and left to decay, as in so many of the former cities today. The history books found on campus, mostly written after the Great Transformation, recount how, in those most difficult early days, many lives were lost, and consequently, many settlements became uninhabited. This allowed plants and animals to repopulate these areas. So today, instead of individual trees among numerous houses, I see the ruins of a

suburb, hidden within a mighty beech forest.

I just remember that my great-grandfather also wrote something about this, about the time when the cities became emptier and emptier. I open the list of my saved search queries again. *›Ah yes, one of these entries could be it…‹*

> *August 4, 2035*
>
> *It's been dark for a week now, and we're slowly beginning to suspect why – what's falling appears to be volcanic ash. We know nothing of a volcanic eruption nearby, and that's bad, very bad! Because that can only mean that large volcanoes, which have been slumbering somewhere in the Arctic beneath the ice sheet, have become unstable again due to the melting ice and are spewing out so much ash that the sky is darkening across all of Europe…*
>
> *We harvested all the vegetables that were ripe enough. With the darkness and the ash, everything in our fields will soon be ruined. This is very worrying for the future, as we don't know how long the darkness and the associated cold will last. It's eerie to have only as much light at midday as at dusk… and from now on we can only use candles and oil lamps. The solar panels are now useless.*
>
> *I wonder if this really had to happen, after everything we've already experienced, and especially now when we thought we'd found a safe haven... I'm feeling a bit pessimistic right now, Adina says too.*
>
> *Arthur is already coughing, even though he doesn't leave the house. But the ash is creeping almost everywhere… and it's not just Arthur… Adina has also noticed one of the children having trouble breathing.*
>
> *Despite the weather, the procurement group was out again. There are always little things our people find in the towns. But this time it was very dangerous for Noram. He was determined to break into a warehouse, which was guarded by a group of armed men. He partially succeeded. He was caught on his way out and escaped badly beaten and covered in blood. Luckily, in a way, he had gone there alone. Anselm and Jutta didn't want to go with him and waited for*

him in a small grove of trees. When they saw him running towards them and being chased, they threw stones at his pursuers from the shadows of the bushes, causing them to stop, startled, and then turn back. When Noram reached them, he collapsed immediately. They had to carry him almost all the way home. He has now regained consciousness and, as it turns out, only suffered superficial injuries. His great fortune was that the men had no firearms or bladed weapons. He escaped with a concussion, bruises, and deep abrasions; thankfully, nothing life-threatening.

All in all, today was not a good day. I also wonder how people's lives will change further, and above all, how many more will lose their lives because of these constant new catastrophes? At the same time, I have to admit to myself that I'm very horrified to think whether this isn't actually what I sensed years ago as a possible way forward... if a life that truly exists in harmony with a shared equilibrium of all beings is to be possible, then it will only be possible if there were correspondingly fewer people on the planet. But I never wanted anything like this... I didn't want people to starve and kill each other for a morsel of food... I realize, however, that my wishes and thoughts definitely have nothing to do with the causes of these catastrophes... but the thoughts are there...

February 28, 2035

The biggest problem I see right now is communication with other communities. We know they exist, but it takes far too much time to carry messages from A to B on foot, and even then, covertly. Noram's satellite phone is useless here. Telephones and the internet still don't work, and I don't have much hope that there will be communication options for ordinary people anytime soon. The armed groups have their radios, but we can't get our hands on them. And every community would need one. Yes, that would be one solution, but where would we get so many devices, and who would set them up? Noram could do it, yes. But we need more than that…

One thing makes me very happy: Arthur has been able to recover

somewhat. He's doing better. We're all doing better. We still don't have much to eat here, but the stress of our escape from Frankfurt is gone, and the certainty we've gained that we've indeed found a relatively safe place to stay here brings a very welcome sense of relief.

Adina is really blossoming in her work with the children, and in her interactions with the adults as well. It's astonishing how quickly she was able to connect with everyone and how comfortable she already is with most of them. She's already implemented the first steps towards a structured lesson for the children, and everyone listens to her with rapt attention. The parents, too. I still find it a bit difficult to talk to everyone, and some still look at me suspiciously. But people here don't seem to have any problems with Adina or Noram. Even Arthur, who at seventy is the oldest in the community, is finding it easy to connect with the children, especially with his quirky and witty manner. But they elected me to the council of elders, presumably only because of my age.

I'm currently thinking about how exactly I can address what's going on inside me in the next discussion. I'd like to talk about the role of humanity in the bigger picture and, in doing so, question the way we live. This is important to me. However, I don't yet know if this is the right time for the others here as well. There are so many practical matters on which our very survival depends that we need to discuss and for which we need to find solutions. For me, it's all connected. Especially this, and how we communicate with other communities.

Noram returned yesterday from one of his procurement runs in Pforzheim and reported that they had to move around with extreme caution, as armed groups and bandits were lurking everywhere. The city appears to be completely deserted, as the ordinary people who had tried to survive on the outskirts with their small gardens have either already left due to the raids or have just been abducted by armed groups for forced labor. He also said that people in the city are rather fearful and distrustful. The fear of armed and violent people or seemingly threatening situations is very high.

External violence is also an issue we must consider and address as a community: What do we do if we are attacked, or were to be attacked? How do we react, how do we defend ourselves? We will also have to implement structural measures for defense, whether we like it or not. Unfortunately, we can no longer hope for government assistance…

What's becoming increasingly clear is that many people have already died from lack of food and disease. Here in Germany, and around the world, especially in cities. I once saw a gnawed human skeleton lying on the street in Karlsruhe. There are also more and more stray dogs and cats, which shows that the human population, at least in cities, is dwindling.

In the communities we're now connected with, many people are saying that half the people they once knew have passed away. That's very sad, but also a great opportunity, if I look at it from the perspective of general progress…

May 5, 2044

Our family is experiencing a very joyful time these days. First, it was Noram's thirty-third birthday, and then right after that, little Simon was born. Noram and Rachida are beaming with joy, as are we. Rachida still needs some time to recover from the birth, because little Simon decided at the last minute to greet the world bottom first. I can't really blame him, but our midwife had to work on Rachida's belly for a while until the birth was complete.

Looking at Noram today with Simon in his arms, I can't help but remember how desperate Adina and I sometimes were when Noram was born. We had everything we needed to raise him, but the fear of the future was still there. We had somehow sensed that something big was coming, but we couldn't for the life of us imagine how it would all unfold and whether we would survive with our child. From our comfortable lives at the time, we wondered how we would manage to give our son a life, how we would have enough to eat, and

how we could keep death at bay.

The period of upheaval we had anticipated arrived later than expected, and we weathered that difficult time with Noram's help and support. Now, with the birth of his child and our grandson, we have gained so much experience that I not only feel no fear of the future, but I must even admit that I am very confident Simon will grow up in a world that is far better than the one into which his father was born.

The website of the working group on population development states that the world population is estimated at around two billion, with a downward trend, as the number of births does not compensate for the number of people still dying from malnutrition and disease. We have gained a new member here in Walzbachtal. That's good. I am now hopeful that the world I have dreamed of for so long can slowly but surely become a reality.

However, there is still much to be done. Noram is currently participating in discussions regarding the future operation of production facilities to meet the minimum requirements for materials and equipment. He is one of the few experts in communications technology and IT who can assess the actual needs from a technical perspective. Fortunately, the group also includes several programmers who were previously active in the open-source community and who will now take care of the necessary software. Together, they will define the requirements for what absolutely must be produced and maintained to keep local and global communication running.

Transportation is clearly very important. Noram and I have learned this the hard way on our travels. When there's no service, journeys become very long and dangerous. I'll be attending a meeting near Basel as a representative of the communities in our area to organize the interregional joint transport of goods and people, and I'm very curious to see how things will develop.

My great-grandfather's notebook entries repeatedly transport me to a world full of feelings that are unfamiliar yet also strangely familiar. They are like glimpses into the lives of my ancestors, from a distant perspective, like a documentary. I never got to

know my grandmother Rachida, and now I feel deeply moved to experience my father's birth in this way. I realize that if this moment hadn't happened, then I wouldn't exist either.

My communicator hums softly to itself. On the small screen, I see Ajola's face. I dismiss it. Not now. Not with my mouth full, and besides, my mind is elsewhere, more on myself than on her. My last bite is swallowed, and now… *›Where's my... Damn! Who packed my backpack and forgot my water bottle?‹* I check again. In vain. Luckily, there's a dispenser station somewhere on every train, just for people like me. I just need to find out exactly where it is. I stand up and realize that there's only one other passenger in the entire carriage besides me. It's a man who's now so sound asleep that I'm surprised he can still keep his balance in the seat. I slowly walk to the information board at the end of the carriage and type in »drinks«. The train map immediately appears on the screen, showing the location of the food and beverage dispenser machines. The dispenser station is in the next carriage, near the back of the train. A few steps and I'm there, browsing the machine's selection. I'm in luck. They have water and... water. So I take some water and head back. *›Somehow, this traveling is rather mundane,‹* a thought trickles through my mind. It's early afternoon, and after eating and drinking, I could certainly use a moment of complete peace and quiet. Just like my travel companion. He's clearly a seasoned traveler. I chuckle quietly to myself. I feel like I'm in a bad movie.

›No, don't go to sleep,‹ I tell myself firmly. It might be a good time to double-check the upcoming connections that MultiMod has flagged as still uncertain. Time is running short until Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, and I don't want to miss the ferry to Africa. And perhaps there's an earlier connection in Lyon after all? *›...because there's also the section with the bicycle. That would be a faster alternative, not bad either,‹* I think to myself, and start checking the queries in the Communicator.

"How do we get from Arles to Marseille?" I hear one of the two passengers who boarded from Dijon ask.

"That's still up in the air; as far as I can see, there's no reliable connection yet. But I think we'll know more tomorrow in Lyon," replies a second voice behind me.

"Hello there...," I say, glancing around the seats.

However, I still don't see anything except two backpacks in the aisle in front of the carriage entrance. I stand up. Now I also see two men of different ages, their heads

together over a communicator.

“Hello, I just heard that you also have part of the journey to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer ahead of you, just like me…”, I say again.

I stand waiting next to the men. They turn to me and look at me friendly.

"Hello, I'm Jacques. And you?" the older of the two introduces himself immediately.

"And I'm Paul," the other nods at me.

"Why are you going to Marseille and not Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, if I may ask?" I press impatiently.

I immediately realize that I might be too curious, but that doesn't seem to bother them in the slightest.

“We’re going to Marseille for a tricky loading operation,” replies the man who introduced himself as Paul. “The automated loading station in Marseille is broken, so we have to do it ourselves again. We’re both crane operators, you know,” he continues

The older one, Jacques, is looking at me very carefully.

"And you, what brings you to the sea? The swimming season is almost over, considering the time of year," he says in a very calm tone. "And, once again, what is your name, if I may ask?" he follows with a smile.

“Oh, excuse me. I’m Mika,” I reply. *›Where have my manners gone? Leyla would die of embarrassment if she found out...‹* “I’m on my way to Africa, to Burkina Faso…”

“How funny that we just happened to run into you,” Jacques interrupts. “Our assignment also has something to do with Africa, albeit only very remotely. So, you’re going to Africa? You certainly seem to fit in there. But I’m guessing you didn’t grow up there.”

I look at him, somewhat surprised. I can't remember ever being told anything like that and I'm not quite sure how to interpret it.

“Exactly, I have African roots,” I say slowly, “but I’ve never been there. Why the question?”

Paul makes a reassuring gesture and says:

"Please don't take offense! Jacques is just an old codger and he really likes asking people strange questions. He just means that the color of your skin suggests that Africa must have a special meaning for you and that it's almost obvious that it's what's drawing you there, somehow... do you see what I mean?"

›Now I'm totally confused!‹

“No, now I don’t understand anything at all,” I say somewhat defiantly, feeling anger rising within me, the cause of which I cannot identify.

Jacques' face is impenetrable. When he speaks, his voice sounds very sad.

"You must excuse me, little Mika. As my younger friend Paul already said, I'm just an old man who's seen too much in his very long life. You're still too young to know, and these days children aren't told everything the way things used to be. So you might find my remarks confusing. Just forget them. Sometimes I say things I haven't really thought about... is that alright?" he finally asks me, and I can see in his eyes that there's still more to say.

My gaze wanders from one person to the other, and I'm feeling rather uncomfortable. Nevertheless, I say that everything is fine and want to go back to my seat. Paul's hand gently holds me back.

"If it's okay with you, we'd still like to know more about your journey. Would you like to tell us what your next steps are?"

His demeanor encourages me to stay and speak. I'm uneasy, but I don't feel threatened either. Jacques' words are confusing and remind me of an entry in Ethan's notes about differences between people. I haven't finished reading the entry because I found what it described very disturbing. I look at Paul for a few seconds, and then, when I feel ready, I speak.

“It’s time to explore the African part of my heritage, and incidentally, I’ll be participating in an exciting project,” I hear myself say. “I’ve never been to Africa, and now that I’ve finished my studies at the local learning campus, it’s time to get to know more of this world. From Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, I’ll be continuing my journey by ship. I’ve never been on a ship before, and I’ve never even seen a Flettner rotor in operation.”

“That’s interesting,” Paul remarks. “We’re supposed to help load a Flettner cargo ship in Marseille. Perhaps that’s the very ship you’ll be traveling on. What’s the latest time you have to be there?”

“According to the MultiMod connections displayed so far, the ship I want to travel on is scheduled to leave Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in a week,” I say after a quick glance at my communicator.

“Well, then you still have plenty of time to get there,” Jacques’ voice rings out. “We have to be there in two days and start work. Our ship is supposed to leave in four days.”

›That sounds interesting!‹ I think, surprised, and ask further questions.

“How are you getting there so quickly? You must have a different connection than the one I was offered.”

“Yes, of course. We’re being transported there very quickly by special transport. We just got the last two spots precisely because they need us there so urgently,” Paul explains. “For your trip, if I understand you correctly, it’s not so urgent that you arrive on a specific day. But the ship we’re supposed to load has an important deadline to meet. It’s carrying spare parts for a power plant on the north coast of Africa, which are needed on time. Otherwise, many people there would be left without electricity,” he adds proudly.

“Yes, I understand. It’s true that I don’t necessarily need to get to Burkina Faso very quickly,” I confirm. “However, the ship I’m supposed to take is the only one in the next few months that would get me close enough. So I need to catch it in time if I want to arrive this year.”

My words find a silent agreement in the faces of the two men. For a while, we say nothing more. I glance out the window now and then. Small, cultivated plots of land are repeatedly lost in the vast forest that covers the landscape like a carpet. By a stream, beneath a willow tree, a grey heron waits motionless for its prey. Shadows and rays of light chase each other on the interior walls of the carriage, and I suddenly feel very tired.

"Where are you getting off to catch your fast transport?" I ask as my last question before saying goodbye to them.

"Chalon-sur-Saône," Paul replies, "that means in a few minutes. Have a good trip!" he adds as they both shoulder their backpacks.

"Yes, thank you, you too!" I call out to them and sit down again next to my backpack.

I have to get off in Lyon first, in order to continue my journey by bus the next day.

That is, if everything works out as the MultiMod app is currently showing my connections. I'm somewhat relieved that I don't have to travel with the two men. Their conversation is still ringing in my ears, and I need to think about what what Jacques said might mean for me.

Colmar - Chalon-sur-Saône

Visiting near Lyon

I'll call the Dubois family, where I'll be staying tonight. My communicator establishes a connection and the friendly face of a woman appears on the display.

"Bonjour Madame Dubois," my communicator translates my greeting.

"Good afternoon, Mika," the translation service replies. "When will you arrive in Lyon?"

"I'll arrive at the MultiMod station around 6 p.m. What's the quickest way to get to you in Marennes from there?"

As always, I'm a bit confused by the asynchronous communication. *›I guess that's necessary,‹* I think, *›because I haven't learned French yet...‹* I had intended to at least begin to learn the languages I encounter along the way. However, I haven't gotten very far. The automatically translated female voice continues to guide me.

"Oh, it's only ten kilometers. Why don't you take one of the e-bikes at the MultiMod station, enter Marennes as your destination, and half an hour later you'll be at the town hall. We'll meet there. Agreed?" suggests Mrs. Dubois.

"Great, that's a good idea. I'll see you at the town hall around 7 p.m.," I agree, and after turning off the translator, I proudly add, "Merci beaucoup!

›I just barely managed to remember that,‹ I chuckle, my gaze sweeping over the list of messages that had come in. Besides Ajola, Simon and Lares had also gotten in touch, as well as Reyad. *›So, we'll go through them one by one?‹*

“Hello Leyla,” I greet my mother, who, as so often, is sitting at her desk.

“Hello Mika, where have you ended up?”

“I’m still on the train, just before Lyon, and I had an interesting, even thought-provoking, encounter with two crane operators who were also on their way to Marseille.”

“Really? What made you think?”

“One of them made a comment about my skin color. As if that made a difference. I’ve never experienced anything like that before. It was very strange. I didn’t feel good about it at all,” I say, still feeling the inner tension.

“Oh Mika, that’s a horrible experience. I’ve only encountered reactions like that a few times, mostly when I was younger. I remember it was the much older generations who reacted that way when they met people who looked different,” she says. “But nothing like that has happened recently. I thought we were all past that stage. And by ‘we,’ I mean everyone living in Europe.”

“Older people, you say? It was something similar with this Jacques. Quite an old man, I think. I once saw a note on the subject from Great-Grandpa Ethan. I’ll have to read what he wrote. I don’t really understand what you mean right now.”

“You can’t, dear Mika. You’re lucky to have been born in a part of the world where this kind of thing almost never happens anymore. But it’s obviously not completely over. A few more generations will have to grow up to learn that these differences shouldn’t have any real significance in how people value one another. You’re also learning in your studies that people should focus on diversity and peace instead of seeing differences as disadvantages. The older generation among us experienced something different during their upbringing. But our society is on the right track, I think…” Leyla reassures me. “How long until you get to Lyon?” she asks me after a moment of silence, obviously also to change the subject.

I'd actually like to know more about it, but I understand that the topic isn't exactly pleasant for my mother either. I can quite well imagine why, especially now, after my own very recent experience. *›What must it have been like when my great-grandfather came to Europe…,‹* flickers a final thought before I answer.

"I'll be arriving in Lyon soon and will get in touch again in a few days. Okay? Please say hi to everyone for me and have a good time," I finally say goodbye.

"Yes, get in touch if you have anything to report or just if you have any questions. Safe travels, Mika!" I hear my mother's voice, and the screen goes dark.

I'm still uneasy inside. Ethan wrote in his notes about an incident that happened to

my great-grandfather Zanga. Back then, such incidents were apparently still commonplace.

January 12, 2016

Zanga arrived on campus today, at the sociology students' meeting place, with a deep gash on his head. He was covered in blood. He was ambushed by a group of young men at the campus entrance and was first insulted and spat upon, and then fists were thrown. One of the attackers then struck him on the head with a wooden slat. We were able to provide him with some first aid and patch him up. But we couldn't really cheer him up. He has already experienced violence several times. These sick people insist that he should go back to Africa and not eat our meager food... it is the poor who are pitted against the even poorer and can only express themselves through violence... yet none of the hooligans protest that we are the ones who perpetrate the misery in the places from which these people then have to flee to us...

I then took Zanga home with me. He was afraid to return to his accommodation. He'll stay here until the situation becomes clearer.

I like to think we have to do something to prevent things from getting as bad here in Europe as they are elsewhere in the world, but I'm not entirely sure we'll actually make it happen. Everything is interconnected. The change needed to bring about improvement for everyone has to be global. To only be able to live a little better in one corner of the world and refuse to see that one's own prosperity means the poverty of others is not only foolish, but downright dangerous.

The fact that CETA and TTIP have been virtually signed, despite our massive protests, is slowly driving me to despair. A feeling of powerlessness is creeping over me. When hundreds of thousands protest in Berlin and other major cities, but it achieves absolutely nothing, it's an experience of utter hopelessness… and the fact that the British, for whatever their actual reasons, want to leave the EU doesn't make it any better.

> *Not for us, and not for the countries from which people are forced to flee to England and Europe either… Fortress Europe is currently being built to defend us – the rich – from the danger of the poverty we have created…*

I'm truly glad that such violent behavior has become the extreme exception these days. I've never had to see myself in that light before. I'm noticing now that the events of that time are causing me a tug in my heart. *›Is it fear?‹* a question arises. But I don't want to think about it. It makes me very uncomfortable.

The autumn day is drawing to a close, and I watch the sunset, mesmerized. The sky has turned a deep crimson, and darkness is slowly falling. I've been traveling for over eight hours now, and I still have some distance to cover. *›Who confirmed these cycling stages in InterMod?‹* I wonder, getting off the train at Lyon's main station. As tired as I am, I really don't want to have to cycle another ten kilometers. But a deal's a deal. There's only one bike left at the bike stand, and my communicator is flashing as I approach it. I start the reservation process, and a metallic click on the bike confirms it's available. I quickly adjust the saddle and handlebars. It's a real old thing. Probably one of the first models. However, despite rust spots and a slight squeak, the bike is quite comfortable to ride. The display already shows the correct address and says I'll be there in half an hour.

The route leads me first through the empty streets of the now almost deserted southern part of town, and then very quickly onto country lanes amidst freshly picked fields and lush orchards. Cycling in the cool evening air feels good. The landscape in the twilight looks like a surreal painting I've seen somewhere in a documentary. To the right, the sunset; to the left, the darkness of a clear September night. In the distance, the yellow lights of Marennes shimmer, and my stomach is rumbling. I'm already looking forward to dinner.

A woman is standing in front of one of the illuminated entrances. She sees the light of my bicycle and waves to me.

“Mika?” I hear her voice, which is completely different from the one in the communicator. “C’est toi?” she asks.

›This is going to be fun,‹ I think, and wave back with a grin, without saying anything. I'm not really sure which language to address her in, as my French is definitely not good enough for a conversation.

“Oui…”, I murmur strainedly, “c’est moi, Mika…”, and then I get off the bike, not quite knowing what to do next.

Madame Dubois smiles at me and then speaks to me in German, almost without an accent.

"It's so nice to meet you, Mika," she says, taking my hand in hers as a greeting.

I must look either very bewildered or very stupid, because she feels compelled to explain her language skills to me:

“I was married to a German once, and lived in a community near Cologne for a while. I’m a foreign language teacher, and one of them is German. I imagine that’s quite convenient for you, isn’t it?” she says with a smile.

“Phew, that’s really convenient. My French is far from acceptable. The few words I just said are all I know,” I stammer, relieved. “I wouldn’t have known how to communicate with you without the communicator.”

“Well, that works out perfectly. I’m Amelie, by the way. Come on, I imagine you’re not only tired but also hungry. You can leave the bike in the barn. I’ll take it back to the InterMod station tomorrow. I have to go to Lyon anyway to pick up my mother.”

“Yes, thank you, Amelie, nice to meet you,” I reply kindly. “Tiredness and hunger, those are exactly my topics tonight!”

I park the bike in the large shed next to the house and terminate the reservation in the communicator. Amelie Dubois leads me through a dimly lit hallway into the old building. We climb a small flight of stairs and, as far as I can tell, enter a gigantic kitchen. The room seems crammed with pans, pots, bundles of spices, and jars of preserves. In the center sits a table, about the size of my room at home, piled high with so much stuff that I almost feel dizzy. One corner, however, is clear and neatly set with a plate and cutlery. Amelie takes me there. The air already smells so delicious that I have to swallow my own saliva several times to avoid drooling unintentionally. It's not that we don't cook well at home, but here, everything seems to revolve around delicious cooking and eating. I have to ask.

"Um, Amelie, who lives here, you alone?"

Amelie looks at me somewhat confused, looks around and then bursts into a healthy laugh that shakes her whole body.

“No, Mika, no! We agreed to meet at the community center, didn’t we? That’s our

large communal kitchen, and there are guest rooms upstairs. You'll sleep in one of them tonight. You've been out for a long time today, so you'll have dinner here. It seemed like the best and easiest solution."

"That was a very good idea!" I confirmed, sitting down at the already set table.

Amelie whirls around me and serves me a hearty-smelling soup. *›Hmm, that really does smell good,‹* I think, and reach for the soup spoon, which is nowhere in sight. Amelie notices my hesitation and immediately apologizes.

"Oh, I forgot the spoon," she says, rummaging through the drawers of a massive cupboard at the far end of the kitchen. After a few moments, she returns with a very interesting-looking spoon and proudly informs me, "We have a very large collection of cutlery here, and I brought this spoon with me from Cologne. It's, so to speak, part of my inheritance from my first marriage—a very old silver spoon. I hope you like it?"

I pick up the spoon and examine the ornate decorations with curiosity. The silver has tarnished slightly in places, especially on the handle, but otherwise it shines as if freshly polished. *›The first marriage?‹*

"Amelie? You were talking about your husband and Cologne, and now you're saying something about your first marriage there. What happened back then? Why did you actually go back to France?" I ask, carefully starting to eat the soup.

"Oh, Mika, that's an old story. My husband at the time, Gustav, died in an accident," she says, and I can sense a great sadness in her voice. "We had only been married for a few years when he was suddenly taken from me. I stayed in the community near Cologne for a while afterward," she continues, "but soon I felt very lonely without him. Shortly after, I became homesick and thought I could put my German skills to good use as a language teacher on our campus in Marennes. I had already learned the language during my studies, and the years in Germany had helped me speak it even better. That's how I came back here. That was twelve years ago, and I've settled in again and am happy. I remarried and had children. You'll definitely meet my son Pierre tomorrow morning; he just turned seven. He'll bring you the milk for breakfast."

Her face brightens and a happy smile spreads across it. *›Why do I always come up with such difficult questions? It could be something easy for a change. But at least! The story seems to have had a happy ending.‹*

Amelie is a petite woman with reddish-blonde hair and large brown eyes that radiate a deep warmth and kindness. She seems younger than my mother, but has the same restless nature. No sooner have I finished the last drops of soup than she asks me again, in that caring voice that is so familiar to me from my mother.

"Would you like to try the mushroom quiche, Mika?"

"Quiche? What's that?"

"It's a special French dish served in bite-sized portions. Very tasty, I can assure you," she smiles at me. "Do you like mushrooms?"

"Of course! We always go mushroom hunting after it rains. My parents are both good cooks, and mushrooms can be prepared in countless ways. But I've never heard of quiche before."

"That surprises me," says Amelie. "The name actually comes from 'cake,' and the dish is very common in your region."

“Well,” I replied, “as you may have already noticed, our family’s roots aren’t solely in Europe, and my mother, in particular, is the one who wasn’t born there. I’m currently on my way to visit my grandparents in Burkina Faso. At home, we have a wide variety of dishes, many of them from Burkina Faso. This means that we don’t necessarily only eat traditional German cuisine. Quiche, for example, hasn’t been on the menu yet.”

"Burkina Faso, you say? Wasn't that a French colony? French cuisine must be known there, right? Wait a minute," she says suddenly, and hurries to the cupboard next to the large cooking stove to take out a large platter with small round and square »things« and place it on the table in front of me. They look good and smell delicious too. "There!" she shoves the platter in front of my face. "Those are quiches. Do you recognize them now?"

I would love to confirm that I know the dish, but unfortunately I have to pass.

"I'm sorry, Amelie. They look delicious, but they don't seem familiar. At least not from home. Maybe once I've tasted them?" I say, taking a round piece with a small slice of mushroom clearly visible on it. The baked pastry melts instantly in my mouth, and I actually recognize flavors that are also in some of my mother's dishes.

"So? What do you say now?" Amelie looks at me with wide, curious eyes.

"I know the taste, yes, but I can't quite place it in any particular dish or name. It just tastes good and familiar. If this is quiche, then I'm sure I've eaten something like this

before, under a different name."

Amelie's face beams with satisfaction; she sits down next to me and offers me more quiches.

“Would you like something to drink?” she asks, and before I can answer with my mouth full, she hurries off again, this time out of the kitchen, obviously looking for what she would like to offer me to drink.

I can't help but admit to myself that I feel very comfortable here. I've only been in this house for an hour, with a woman I don't know at all, in the middle of a region I've never seen before, and I already feel right at home. *›So what Oliver told me must be true. No matter where you go, people are friendly and very helpful...‹* I think to myself, stuffing another quiche into my mouth, this time a square one with a piece of carrot on top as decoration. *›Delicious, really!‹* Somewhere in the house I hear indefinable noises and suspect Amelie is searching in an old cellar filled with bottles. There's a clinking and a dull thumping, squeaking and growling, as if the whole building is participating in the search. Suddenly Amelie is back in the doorway, holding a dusty bottle. She smiles at me again in a motherly way and proudly announces:

“This, dear Mika, is last year’s apple juice. I still had a bottle. You probably know the name, don’t you?” she says with a smile, and continues. “This year’s apple juice hasn’t been pressed yet, and I think it goes well with quiches.”

“Yes, of course, I know apple juice,” I agree, “we drink a lot of it at home.”

“Well then, tchin-tchin!” she says as she places a large earthenware cup in front of me, filled to the brim with the fragrant juice of Provençal apples.

I feel full and comfortable, and suddenly very, very tired. Amelie seems to notice immediately and suggests showing me the room upstairs. I glance hesitantly at the messy table, which prompts Amelie to firmly push me towards the door.

"It's nice of you to think to tidy up. You seem like a well-behaved child. But it's not necessary. You're tired, and I have things to do here anyway. So don't worry about it," she announced firmly. "Come on, I'll show you the way."

I gladly obey the »order«. We climb an old wooden staircase with a dangerously wobbly banister, walk through a hallway lined with old cupboards and shelves, and finally arrive in a small attic room, lit by a pale bedside lamp. It smells of lavender and rosemary, and I can hear the wind whistling in the brickwork. *›Wonderful,‹* I think, delighted. *›If I could have wished for this, it probably wouldn't have been so perfect!‹*

“This is a very nice room,” I thank Amelie, who has stopped in the doorway with her hands folded in front of her.

“Yes, I’m glad you like it,” she says in a soft voice. “This barn used to be my family's, and I often slept here as a child. In recent years, it’s been converted into a community center and is regularly used for community meetings. We also use the large kitchen to provide food and drinks for our celebrations, which, rain or shine, are held in the large function room behind it.” She gestures vaguely somewhere behind her. “Right now, it’s only our guests who stay here. Tonight, you’re here alone,” she adds, her gaze lovingly taking in the objects. She then turns to me and looks into my eyes with concern. “I hope it’s okay for you to sleep here alone, isn’t it?”

I feel the blood rushing to my cheeks and say in a timid voice.

"Of course, everything is fine. It's not the first time..."

›Like a mother! But even if I were trembling with fear, she'd be the last person to know!‹ I can't really escape her gaze and I'm truly glad when she finally turns away and calls out quietly to me as she walks off:

"Good. Then I wish you a good, restful night, Mika."

She's gone. Backpack next to the wardrobe. The door suddenly opens again.

"If you need to go," I hear Amelie's voice, "the toilet and bathroom are the last door on your left, before the stairs. There's a light switch next to the door. I haven't turned it on since I know my way around so well. It's better at night if you turn the light on. Is that okay?"

"Yes, thank you," I murmur, and the door closes again.

›Where was I? What do I do now?‹ are the last thoughts that come to mind. From bed, I can see the stars through the window. The sky is clear, and they twinkle at me familiarly.

◊ ◊ ◊

The first rays of sunshine stream through the small skylight. It's quiet outside, and I feel the urge for a hot shower. *›Down the hall and then left?‹* I gather everything I need from my backpack and stumble down the hall towards the bathroom.

"Bonjour, Monsieur," a child's voice squawks from the stairs.

"Bonjour," I reply, without being able to see anyone.

›It's probably Pierre, Amelie's little boy,‹ I suspect.

“Bonjour, Pierre,” I repeat, looking down the stairs.

A little redhead stands on the landing with a milk can, looking up curiously. I approach him and try to explain that he should simply leave the milk in the kitchen, which doesn't seem to be so easy.

I gesture him to follow me into the kitchen. Once there, I touch the huge table and indicate that he should put the milk can down there. He finally understands what I mean and sets the can down. He excitedly runs to a cupboard, finds some bread, and proudly points towards the refrigerator. Visibly relieved and with a mischievous grin, he says goodbye to me.

"Have a good day and enjoy your meal," he calls out as he leaves the community house.

"Thank you, Pierre! Goodbye!" I call after him.

The shower feels good; now I'm really awake and looking forward to breakfast. *›And where can I find some tea?‹* I think, after finding the kettle and boiling it with plenty of water on the stove. *›Well, if need be, I'll just drink hot water.‹*

“Voulez-vous du thé ou du café?” asks Pierre, who had turned around again.

“Tea, perfect,” I stammer.

Pierre goes to one of the large kitchen cupboards, opens two or three doors and presents me with a huge tea collection.

"A bientôt," he adds as he disappears again.

"Yeah, see you later," I reply absentmindedly.

After breakfast, I clear the table and take a cup of tea with me, find the exit from the guesthouse, and sit down on the garden bench next to the front door. A fresh breeze gently caresses me. I see several people busily going about their business. *›With those huge baskets they're loading onto a trailer, they're probably heading off to harvest,‹* I think. A few of them wave a friendly greeting at me. I wave back.

"Did you sleep well and find everything for your breakfast?" asks Amelie, who is just approaching me.

"Yes, great, and your Pierre showed me everything I needed, thank you!"

"As you can see, we'll start picking apples today. You're staying another night, right?"

"I haven't checked my travel plans yet..." I reply, surprised.

My communicator tells me that the bus from Vienne heading south doesn't actually leave until the evening. *›So I'd have the whole day here...‹* I realize.

“Dear Amelie, I’m not leaving Vienne by bus until this evening. If I can somehow make sure I catch the bus in Vienne, could I help out with the harvest this morning?” I ask, assessing the situation.

“Oh, Mika! That’s a great idea!” Amelie beams. “We can really use all the help we can get with the apple harvest, and you can come along with the apples to Vienne this afternoon,” she adds with a smile.

“I guess I’ll need some work clothes,” I’m considering. “Is there a ClothBot here?”

“Yes, of course, it’s housed here in the guesthouse. I’ll be back in half an hour and introduce you to the others. Look, it’s in the corridor on the right; there’s a sign there,” Amelie says as she takes her leave.

Ordering my work clothes is quick and easy, and a short time later, work trousers, a jacket, and a pair of boots are in the dispensing chute. I change in my room and look outside for Amelie, but I can't find her. *›Maybe with the crew by the tractor? Amelie'll turn up eventually...‹*

"Bonjour, Mika," a loud, strong bass voice greets me, though it seems to be coming from a rather short man.

"Allô, Monsieur," I reply.

"Oh Mika, you've already introduced yourselves?" asks Amelie, a little amused, as she steps beside me.

"Bonjour chers amis, puis-je vous présenter Mika? Il nous aidera pour la récolte!" she calls out to the group of onlookers.

›Aha, strangely enough, I actually understood what Amelie said.‹ The group of women and men approach me in a friendly manner. They shake my hand or pat me affectionately on the shoulders and back.

“Hi Mika, thank you so much… that’s how I would translate it,” Amelie said to me with a smile. “Thank you so much from me too for your helpful offer. Lunch is already packed in the trailer; there will be enough for everyone.”

“Amelie, I’m happy to do it. After all, I’m enjoying your hospitality and think it’s only right to thank you with my help. To the whole group, of course!” I said to Amelie, and we slowly set off together.

Marennes - Vienne - Valence - Avignon

To Vienne by Railbike

›Constantly bending over to pick up the apples was exhausting. It really took a toll on my back. But the meal breaks made up for it.‹ I'm sitting in the trailer on the wooden crates in which the harvest has been carefully packed. The tractor is pulling us to a railbike loading station in Sérézin-du-Rhône. *›I'll probably get to ride along,‹* I think happily. It's definitely an opportunity to continue my journey with a freight train towards Avignon. The trailer rocks precariously with every bump in the road. The apple crates are secured, but we still need to be really careful. The guy with the bass voice, who introduced himself as Guillaume, laughs loudly because he sees how I'm struggling to hold on tight as we bump around a bend.

The journey is supposed to continue for a while longer. I try to brace myself with my legs so that, despite the discomfort, I can quickly look up some information about the region. I'm also curious whether Ethan wrote anything about this area. The results of the search surprise me somewhat. I wouldn't have thought that, with the abundance of this harvest, there were times in the past when almost nothing edible could be found here.

> *September 8, 2035*
>
> *We don't really know how we're going to get through the coming winter. I'm not the only one who fears that some of us, the weaker ones, won't survive. Everything we planted has withered. The plants need light. Water alone, which we thankfully still have enough of, isn't sufficient... our supplies are very meager, and the chances of finding*

enough canned goods anywhere are very slim to nonexistent.

The procurement group who were out and about in Heidelberg today brought a leaflet stating that »the German state« will »procure« aid supplies from Africa and South America and that people should register for distribution at the town hall. Believe that... They also write that volcanoes have erupted in Iceland and Greenland and that the expected darkness will have a greater impact in the Northern Hemisphere... I don't think, however, that there is any »state« left that is functional enough to be able to help in any way.

There was also good news today. A man from the Allgäu region came by. As he said, he had deliberately sought us out, as he had heard about our community elsewhere. He's on a »networking tour«, he said, and explained that in the last four weeks he had already visited eight other communities to share information with them, just as he had with us. He mentioned—and this is indeed very interesting and important—that there is already relatively good communication between communities in German-speaking countries, and that it takes place via long-wave radio. He strongly advised us to get a radio and also gave us the necessary frequencies and transmission times we would need to make contact.

I had to talk to Noram immediately. Why hadn't we, especially him, with his satellite phone and radio, thought of it? It doesn't matter now. Noram practically jumped out of his boots and started making plans about where and how to find such a device.

The man from the Allgäu region, named Antim, had more news, but it wasn't good news for any of us. The instability of the Earth's crust caused by the volcanic eruptions has apparently triggered further eruptions worldwide, including in Antarctica. Mount Erebus has erupted there, which will soon lead to even more darkness and cooling. This means that these dark times won't be over anytime soon…

As if that weren't enough, he also talked about the many dead people who can be found everywhere and are slowly becoming normal.

It is all the more important that the networking of communities that

want to cooperate in solidarity is continued. For this, we need a radio transciever. Noram believes that the best place for this is, or rather should be, the university in Heidelberg. Or Stuttgart, but that would be much too far away.

He's already looking for company among the younger men. I'd like to go with him, but I'm afraid I'd only slow him down... it's also very dangerous. There are certainly many »treasures« in Heidelberg that are coveted by many others. But what other option do we have?

What must it have been like back then? Darkness and everything covered in volcanic ash for weeks and months. Nothing green anymore, no fruit, no bread… a miracle that people survived at all. Obviously, many didn't survive those times. I can't even begin to imagine the situation… the food situation wasn't easy even before the volcanic eruption, as Ethan describes. I can only assume that perhaps the experiences of the years before helped some to adapt more easily. However I look at it now, I can hardly put myself in that situation. *›Do I even want to?‹*

May 7, 2032

That we were able to rent this little house in time is nothing short of a miracle. Now the advantage of living a bit on the outskirts of the city and also having a small garden is becoming clear.

Noram can no longer get to the TU in Darmstadt because public transport has stopped running. He was looking for a working ATM today. We still have enough cash, but the situation is so unstable right now that it can't hurt to be prepared. I'm surprised that everything hasn't collapsed yet, that we still have electricity and the phone network is still working. If we didn't have internet, we wouldn't know anything. And I wouldn't be able to work from home. I consider myself one of the lucky ones because I still have a job at all.

My company network is still working, but it's very unstable, making it difficult to work from home. Things aren't any better in the office, assuming there's even a free shared desk to be found...

What I can pat myself, us, and Noram on the back for is that we never "let the money work" for us; otherwise, we too would have

been affected by this stock market crash and financial crisis. What these people really want with their cyberattacks, who is actually behind them, and above all, why, isn't really clear to me, but they have succeeded in making it impossible for a great many poor people to access their savings. The news on the internet is full of such reports, if one can still believe them... at least you can still buy something with money.

Adina came home early today because the doors at her workplace remained closed, even though she works in public administration. The agency's computer network is still down, so she can't access the files. The advantages of digitization, I just say... But she immediately got back to work in the garden. She wants to create raised beds so we can harvest some things ourselves in the fall. I don't know if she'll manage it; I can only help her in the evenings.

I read that in some areas there's no more water and that people are now fighting each other in supermarkets for water and food. It's not so bad where we are yet, and we still have water reserves. Since we returned from Burkina Faso, Noram and I have been stocking up. But they won't last long. I got a message on my phone from the Frankfurt police – an appeal for reason and calm. However, I haven't seen any patrol cars lately.

It's great that we have a garden!

What does this do to me, sitting in a trailer full of fresh fruit? I'm simply glad the times of deprivation are over. I give myself a quick shake to get my bearings and look around again. We're passing some houses hidden behind large elderberry and hazelnut bushes. Ahead, the road curves slightly to the left, and further back, I can see railway tracks. Everyone around me is talking at once, and quite loudly, probably because of the road noise. I listen to them and try to understand.

›Ah, this should be Sérézin-du-Rhône...‹ I gather from my companions' conversation. We've reached the railbike loading station. A vehicle loaded with bulging sacks is waiting on the tracks. We jump off, and everyone pitches in to transfer the crates of apples from the tractor trailer to the railbike, and replace them with several dozen sacks of potatoes and grain.

›I've never ridden in a vehicle like this before,‹ I remark, and take a closer look at the somewhat peculiar contraption. The draisine consists of a large frame mounted on two axles, with a total of four wheels. A large square box, most likely housing the batteries, occupies a significant portion of the floor, running lengthwise down the center. Six seats with pedals, like those on a pedal boat, are visible on each side. Apparently, even after the batteries have run out, you can still cover some distance by pedaling diligently. I suspect this is some kind of cobbled-together twelve-seater electric bicycle.

"A beautiful piece of technology!" comes a somewhat metallic voice from my communicator.

Guillaume is still looking at me patiently, and because of the translator, he's grinning too. I suspect he would say more, but in a way that I could understand.

“Yes, indeed,” I reply, continuing to examine the strange vehicle. “I haven’t seen anything like it before,” I say a short time later. “We also have electric railcars at home, but without pedals. However, they’re much smaller and can’t carry such heavy loads as this one. We mainly use them for short, quick trips along the railway line that connects our communities. It’s a kind of self-governing public transport network. We have a charging station every ten kilometers in case the batteries run out along the way. The railcars can only carry a maximum of four people and light luggage, and they won’t start unless the batteries have enough charge for at least twenty kilometers. But this pedal system isn’t a bad idea at all, and it’s not even new. I can’t say offhand why ours don’t have them…”

Guillaume listens to the translation of my tirade, casually rolling a cigarette. I'm surprised that I keep encountering people who smoke tobacco, even though everyone should know how dangerous it is. Behind us, the last crates of apples are being loaded onto the draisine trailer when Guillaume begins to speak. *›French is a very melodious language,‹* I think, listening to his voice. I can understand some of the words, but not the context. He finishes, and then the voice from my communicator starts up. I have to admit that it sounds very flat and monotonous compared to Guillaume's.

“Yes, we thought it would be better to be independent of external power sources. While we have many windmills and some hydroelectric power plants in the region, during harvest time there's sometimes so much transport that the batteries might not

last until the next charging station. We can't afford to stop in the middle of the road, as others also need to get past us. With the pedal-powered vehicle, we can move forward slowly, but we do. We've gotten so used to it by now that we even pedal with fully charged batteries. I have to say, in recent years we've almost never had to rely solely on pedaling, as the batteries naturally last much longer."

Guillaume spreads clouds of smoke around him, and I move aside to avoid being enveloped in it. He notices and turns away too, smiling.

"I imagine you're very proud of it!" I interject, walking around the railbike contraption, searching for a power outlet.

"It's at the front," Guillaume says, without moving. "The blue-painted box on the bottom right. We've covered it to protect it from moisture in case it rains. It's not used that often anyway, as I said," he adds casually, then continues in a deliberately neutral tone, "We're used to pedaling here in France, if you know what I mean…"

I look at him, puzzled. He looks back appalled and says...

"Surely you haven't heard of the Tour de France, have you? The French are a nation of cyclists," he proclaims at the top of his lungs, giving me a friendly, patronizing pat on the shoulder. "You ride a bike too, don't you? Everyone does. But really good at it…" he says, bending down towards me as if he's about to let me in on the world's greatest secret, "…only the French are really good at it, mon ami!"

I'm debating whether to say something about it and decide against it. Of course, I know about the Tour de France. It was one of the sporting events that, after the period of Transformation long before I was born, helped to foster unity in many regions of Europe. People had practically nothing left, and the bicycle was sometimes the only vehicle with which to cover greater distances. But the idea that the French were the only ones and the best—that's not something I remember.

I'm currently examining the blue box with the charging port. A simple, solid construction that obviously hasn't been used for a long time.

"Respect," I say, looking Guillaume in the eye. He nods with a smile and crushes the cigarette butt on the ground, then carefully places it in a small wooden box. He notices my gaze and explains:

"It's not trash, but organic matter that will later be carefully composted…"

I smile at him in agreement and gather my things. All the apple crates are loaded,

and most people are already sitting on the railbike, waiting for the journey to Vienne to finally begin. I put my backpack in a small basket at the back of the railbike and also sit down on one of the pedal seats. There are exactly twelve of us, all men, who will be riding the railbike. Not all of them are from Marennes. Four or five came on the railbike from Vienne, and besides me, there are two other men who were waiting for us at the loading station and will now be riding along. Guillaume is sitting to my right, still smiling. I have no idea why. I already feel quite tired after working this morning, and to be honest, I'm not particularly looking forward to having to pedal the twenty kilometers to Vienne. But I have to keep going, and this is the next opportunity to travel towards Avignon.

"Allez, allez!" shouts one of the men behind me, and I feel the handcar slowly begin to move. None of us move, though. No one pedals. I look at Guillaume questioningly.

"You're in luck," he says, still grinning.

›His grin is starting to get on my nerves,‹ I think, somewhat irritated. *›It's as if he always has something to hide...‹* Guillaume keeps scrutinizing me and concludes in his smug tone:

"You expect us to have to exert ourselves right away, don't you? But, because of the two tons of apples and because Vienne is downstream, we can roll downhill for a while and don't even need to start the motor. We're not in a hurry, so we'll save both our energy and the batteries," he explains as the railcar slowly but surely picks up speed. "Later, when we reach that group of trees up ahead, we'll start pedaling," he continues, pointing with his outstretched arm towards the horizon.

I follow the railway line with my eyes and can see what he means. It seems the track does indeed slope downhill at first, between fields of grain on the left and the Rhône on the right. It's almost midday, and I have to shield my eyes from the sun to see anything in the distance. The temperature is pleasant, though, and the breeze from the train is noticeable.

“How long will it take us to get to Vienne?” I ask, taking out my communicator. I remember that the bus I booked for the onward journey was scheduled to depart sometime in the early afternoon.

“Are you thinking about the bus?” Guillaume seems to read my mind. “Don’t worry about it. It’ll wait until we get there. Some of our boxes are coming along too,” he

informs me calmly.

“Oh, that’s good. I should have guessed,” I reply. “Is anyone else going towards Avignon?”

“No, not this time. But we’re picking up my niece there. She’s just arriving by bus from the south,” answers the man in front of me, who seems to have overheard our conversation. “By the way…” he adds, “the bus doesn’t go all the way to Avignon, only to Valence. If you want to continue on to Avignon, you’ll have to find something else there to take you further.”

“Yes, I know that,” I reply, glancing at the itinerary on my communicator. “I’ll be spending the night in Valence and then continuing my journey early the next morning on a freight train from Paris that comes via Saint-Étienne.”

“Aha,” says the man sitting across from Guillaume, “that’s a good plan. I mean, if the train actually arrives in Valence on time. Sometimes there are problems on the line and it moves very slowly,” he adds.

“Problems? What kind?”

"Well, this is one of the trains that travels the longest continuous route. In the Grenoble region, there are still many people who need food from the south. That's why this train exists at all, to facilitate the exchange between north and south. The route consists of many individual short sections, some of which were badly damaged in the past and haven't been fully repaired everywhere to this day. This journey, as my cousin, who regularly rides along as a train driver, tells me, is always an adventure. But somehow they always manage to arrive. You just can't really rely on the time..." he concludes.

“But the communicator should display these delays, shouldn’t it?” I ask, somewhat worried. “I’m concerned because I’m supposed to be in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer to catch a ship to Africa. I haven’t planned for much waiting time. The ship is scheduled to leave in three days.”

“Yes, in principle,” Guillaume interjects again. “In principle, I mean that someone has to feed these messages into the system, and if the communication relay happens to be down on that particular stretch of track…” he begins, painting a bleak picture.

"Guillaume, stop teasing that boy all the time!" says the man sitting in front of me, turning to Guillaume and then to me with a rather serious expression. "Young man, I'm Etienne, by the way. What was your name again?"

"Mika..." I say, somewhat surprised.

"Mika, very nice. Mika, listen, Guillaume is a real joker who always has to act like he knows everything, especially in front of younger people and those who don't know him very well. Please don't take it too seriously."

He smiles at me and pretends to slap Guillaume with the back of his hand. Guillaume doesn't even look and silently rolls another cigarette. Only the beginning of a hidden smile twitches at the corner of his mouth.

“Mika, my dear boy,” Etienne continued, “of course it’s on the train’s information system if the train is delayed. The problems that joker feels the need to talk about have been resolved for quite some time now. I even think things were running better and more safely before you were born. Sure, there can be problems on this line, just like on any other. But the connections between the communities are so good these days that the shared rail network is maintained very conscientiously in every section. Just like back home, I imagine, right? I expect you’ll be able to get on the train on time tomorrow, okay?” he finished, giving me a friendly tap on the knee. “Okay?” he repeats, louder, when he sees I’m not really about to reply.

“Yes, yes, sure, everything’s fine,” I stammer, nearly falling off my seat as the pedals started turning at that very moment.

"Here we go! Pedal, young man!" I hear Guillaume shout next to me.

I adjust my movements to those of the others, and soon we are pedaling in unison. I don't feel any high pressure under my feet that I would have to overcome now, as we're going slightly uphill. The railbike simply continues moving smoothly.

“We have a very good translation factor,” I hear Guillaume’s voice again, but this time it doesn’t surprise me that it’s him who speaks up again.

›The day has started well, gone well so far, and seems to be continuing in a positive direction,‹ I think to myself, and continue pedaling vigorously. The railcar makes only the monotonous rolling sound of its wheels. To my left and right, in the trees along the edge of the tracks, I hear birds chirping. Every now and then I see the Rhône River and, on the water, a few small sailboats and solar-powered boats gliding almost silently through the slow current.

Beyond the village of Ternay, Etienne slows down and looks over at me.

"Mika, the switch up ahead needs to be manually switched so we can continue our

journey in the right direction. Do you see the blue and white marked hand lever to our right?"

"Yes, I see it," I reply.

"Then jump out and just switch the lever! We'll wait until you're back on board," Guillaume calls out.

A narrow walkway runs alongside the track, leading to the switch. The handcar is still rolling, so I jump onto the walkway and take a few steps to regain my balance. The hand lever for the switch moves easily, and I see the track section now align with the branch line that leads us south. The handcar has now almost come to a standstill at my level. With a long stride, I land back on it.

“Dans les pédales!”, shout Etienne and Guillaume as if in chorus.

I'm not even properly seated yet, and the pedal under my seat is already swinging. *›They could have waited another two seconds,‹* I curse. I watch the pendulum motion of my pedal before I put my feet on it and start pedaling in time with the others.

I'm starting to feel a bit restless in my stomach. It's been a long time since I've eaten anything.

“Etienne, where did we put the provisions? I’m a bit hungry,” I ask.

“Please wait a moment, Mika. There’s an inn in Chasse-sur-Rhône, right on the route. We’ll take a break there, and they’ll have freshly brewed coffee and tea,” he replies.

“The food supplies are in the box in the pannier if you can’t wait,” says Guillaume, who just can’t wipe the grin off his face.

I decide to wait until the planned stop at the inn. I close my eyes and enjoy the ride.

By Bus to Valence

Repacking the goods in Vienne is done quickly. I think those who want to drive back today are working especially hard.

“This is Gabriella, my niece,” Etienne proudly introduces a young girl, no more than ten years old.

“Bonjour Gabriella,” I greet her. “Je m’appelle Mika.”

“Allô Mika,” she replies, a little embarrassed.

“We need to get going soon, Mika!” says Guillaume, putting Gabriella’s bag in the luggage basket. “I hope you have a safe journey.”

“Thanks! I could use it. I hope the weather holds for you. It looks like rain,” I reply, pointing to the sky, which is gathering heavy, dark clouds.

“Oh, it’s not so bad. We’ll put a side cover on the railcar that will protect us from the rain. The solar panels on the roof are waterproof,” says Etienne. “Have a good trip, and maybe we’ll see each other again.”

“Au revoir,” I say goodbye and look for the InterMod station where I want to find the bus to Valence.

Not far from the train station, I see several bus bays, and a bus has already pulled in. Some people are stowing boxes, sacks, and bags in the bus's hold. *›Then it'll be leaving any minute...‹* I guess. I simply get on and find a window seat. I don't know how long it will be until departure. *›I should probably get in touch with Ajola. She made herself noticeable the other day,‹* I think to myself as the buzzing communicator announces an incoming call.

„"Hey Mika! Where are you, anyway?" Lares' voice snaps at me.

"Hey little brother! Everything alright?" I reply happily.

"Come on, tell me. How far have you gotten so far?" he asks impatiently.

"I've just arrived in Vienne on the Rhône River. It was quite an adventurous ride on a homemade solar-powered electric cargo railcar. With pedals that up to a dozen people can use to propel it forward by pedaling hard. You've never seen anything like it! And two tons of cargo in the trailer!" I report proudly.

"Yeah, that sounds adventurous! But you're not pulling my leg, are you?" Lares asks, sounding a little uncertain.

“No, Lares, I’m sending you a picture I took earlier. The French seem to be very adept at making the most of what little they have. This pedal system, which can be used in parallel with the battery, is quite something. Especially when someone’s already pedaling and you have to find your rhythm,” I explain, sending him the picture I took during our break at the inn.

“Okay! It does look very unusual. The pedals under the seats look like they were taken out of a pedal boat,” Lares observes and laughs loudly.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I thought too,” I laugh along. “But it works perfectly!”

“I’m a little envious of your trip! So many new impressions and experiences, that’s something special!”

“Indeed, and the best part is, if you want, you can experience it yourself,” I say meaningfully, thinking that Lares might soon be on the road himself. “Please give my regards to everyone and tell them that I am doing well and that I am progressing according to plan so far,” I say to him somewhat hastily as I take my leave.

“I will, Mika, keep your chin up!” Lare’s voice rings out, while my communicator reports that it needs a recharge.

Here on the bus, there are two charging stations at each group of four seats. I rummage through my backpack for the cable and plug it in. I feel quite tired, but also a little excited. I wonder if Ethan wrote anything about the energy supply in this region in his notes. I already know from history class that all of Europe was very well supplied with electricity. I search for »electrical energy« and related terms. Two entries are listed.

August 21, 2032

Now they've really done it! We've had no electricity since yesterday. Apparently, nowhere in Europe. The grid has completely collapsed. We were lucky, so to speak, that we live in a banking city, that we still had power from the grid for so long.

It's so good that Noram was able to get this solar panel system after all and, most importantly, put it into operation in time. Otherwise, we wouldn't have any electricity at all. This way, we can at least keep the small refrigerator at a lower temperature for a few hours and have some light in the evenings. Right now, we don't need that much light because it's summer time. But winter is coming.

It is interesting that before the telephone network was shut down, a message was sent to the public stating that »terrorists« had attacked several important substations, and as a result, the international energy network was so destabilized that large parts of it had to be taken out of service.

However, it soon became clear that human error had triggered a chain reaction in the facilities, which were operating understaffed and

inadequately monitored. Unfortunately, many of the systems, particularly the transformers, were so badly damaged by the chain reaction that operations had to be suspended for months. While the effects resembled an electromagnetic bomb attack or a violent solar flare, in reality, only humans were responsible.

Apparently, no one in Europe can get electricity from the international grid anymore. Nothing that relies on electricity is working: water supply, hospital equipment, public transport, servers, or cloud systems… as a result, I'm practically unemployed.

We now have to figure out how to communicate with each other since the phones aren't working. I was just out on the street and everyone's panicking. A police car with a megaphone announced that the government has declared a state of emergency and that citizens are being urged to show solidarity. I suspect it won't amount to anything. I had to hold Noram back when he wanted to explore the city, since it's already evening and the streets aren't lit anymore. Towards the nearest supermarket, I see far too much light, as if it were on fire, and I hear screams.

Adina got scared. Noram is acting well, but is very tense.

The good thing, thankfully, is that our little house is so small and set back a bit from the road. There are bushes in front, and our garden is behind the house. The fact that I'm writing something like this now scares me...

I need to bring Dad to live with us. Adina also thinks that in the current situation, Arthur has a better chance if he doesn't continue living alone. She's right.

March 19, 2038

We finally received indirect news from Zanga and Jitu today. Apparently, they've learned that communities are communicating worldwide via longwave radio. Zanga seems to have briefly attended one of the radio meetings and left a message for us on the bulletin board. They are all doing well, but communication isn't easy, as there's no

radio in Koti yet, and the nearest one is very far away. Zanga and Jitu are also trying to encourage village communities in Burkina Faso to organize themselves into local and regional networks. The »good« side of poverty is that the collapse of the international financial and economic system isn't perceived as so devastating there. People there have always relied on subsistence farming. This, of course, makes dealing with the new situation much easier for them than it is for us in the so-called »civilized« world.

Zanga also reported that Jitu plans to return to Europe soon and hopes to obtain a radio for the community in Koti. Noram has added organizing the radio for Jitu to his list. Based on previous experience and newly established contacts, it is very likely that this will be possible relatively quickly.

Starting tomorrow, I will be joining Noram's upcoming »networking tour«. We will be traveling together throughout the EU regions, trying to support newly formed communities in connecting via longwave radio. The radio meetups have finally allowed many communities to communicate and exchange information again. However, there are also new communities that don't yet have a radio and need help setting one up.

Noram is now considering how the internet could be revived. He's not alone in this. There are many others he's in contact with via radio, and they have even more knowledge than he does. But there's still a long way to go; solutions for a stable and decentralized power supply to operate the necessary local servers are still lacking.

The exchange of experiences thrives primarily through the regular visits that the communities now make to each other. Noram has become one such »traveler« for some time now.

Winter is particularly mild this year and the vegetation is regenerating rapidly. The procurement groups that venture into the big cities say that the pioneer plants are already colonizing the abandoned inner cities and are now overgrowing the empty walls and facades. Some of the vigorous growth even pierce the asphalt and concrete surfaces

of the streets and thrive there in lush greenery.

Vegetable cultivation is progressing well. Many communities are reporting high hopes for a good first harvest this summer.

In most of the communities we are in contact with, self-organization is working increasingly well. The vast majority of people find the way of life in the local, subsistence-based communities more trustworthy than the old political and violent structures before them. In our radio meetings, it becomes clear time and again that, at least in Europe, there are hardly any efforts left to revive the old political and state forms. Hardly anyone listens to those who anachronistically demand this return.

It confirms what I've always known deep down: cooperation at the local and regional level is now working quite well, even without money as a basis for exchange. Only food and equipment essential for survival are shared. Many of the old items are repaired, used jointly, and, if necessary, simply loaned to another community for a certain period before being returned.

As reported in the radio meetings, there are currently very few or no newborns in the communities. The surviving people, most of whom are under 40, instinctively hold back from having children. The elders and many children had not survived the difficult times of war and famine.

Here in Walzbachtal, everyone is healthy so far. We could all still have a bit more meat on our bones, but I would say we're over the worst of it.

I, at fifty years old, am one of the oldest people around. That I survived is solely thanks to Adina. Without her loving care and encouragement, I would probably have kicked the bucket long ago. I am truly grateful to her.

›The search results aren't really conclusive...‹ I mutter to myself. Not that my search terms were very precise, but I had hoped for a bit more. I also notice that it's becoming increasingly difficult for me to concentrate. It's not just because of Ethan's some-

what strange-looking notes. *›Time for a nap...‹* I lean back slowly and find a more comfortable position. My eyes immediately begin to close.

◊ ◊ ◊

›Where am I? Oh, on the bus!‹ I quickly realize. I look for the journey planner and see that I will soon arrive in Valence. Outside, it is slowly getting dark.

The communicator indicates that the battery is fully charged again. I check my travel details to plan my next steps in Valence. I'll continue on to Avignon by train. *›Okay? The train leaves at five in the morning.‹* I'll spend the night in a guesthouse in Valence. The guesthouse is right next to the InterMod station, and this time I can get in without checking in or being picked up. I just need the displayed booking code.

The bus stop in Valence is deserted. The InterMod station is located in an old square bordered by several mighty linden trees. In the center, illuminated by a single streetlamp, stands a fountain from which clear water flows from the jug of a girl's figure. I'm hungry, but I'm not sure where to go. I turn around and ask the bus driver for help.

“Excuse me, where can I find something to eat here?” my translator asks, after I've told him I want something to eat.

“No idea,” the woman says, sounding bored.

She's a bit older than me, but not so old that I wouldn't address her informally. She looks at me curiously, still from the driver's seat, and continues with a smile:

“But there’s a food dispenser station here that offers regional and international dishes. I sometimes get food there myself. If you like, you can come with me,” she says kindly.

“Thank you very much,” I reply without using the translator. “Yes, I’d love to come,” comes then the voice from my communicator.

“Okay,” she says. “I’m just going to take the bus away, wait here, I’ll be right back,” she adds.

She closes the doors and parks the bus in one of the designated bus parking spaces. I continue to look around. The air is fresh and filled with aromas I've never encountered before. *›The fresh air of Provence?‹* I think to myself with a smile, as my nose catches the scent of something stale.

"I am Louise," says the woman, who is now standing next to me again.

She points with her outstretched arm towards an old building complex that probably used to be part of the city center.

"That's where we need to go," she says and starts walking without waiting for me.

"I am Mika," I introduce myself behind her back and hurry after her.

The square and the building complex we're approaching seem to be devoid of any other living beings besides us. Only a few ground-floor windows occasionally emit a light. The rest, especially the upper floors, appear uninhabited. She walks briskly toward an entrance. An old, disused neon sign displays the name »Hôtel de Lyon«. Louise heads for one of the revolving doors of the old hotel lobby and makes a beeline for a self-service dispenser station at the front.

I struggle a bit with the revolving door, which isn't working quite as I'd expected, but I finally manage to get inside. The automated food dispenser isn't large. Nevertheless, I'm surprised by the sheer number of dishes on offer. Louise already has a plate of steaming food in her hand and watches me with amusement as I'm still undecidedly studying the menu.

"Mika? I can't really help you decide what you want to eat," she says, smiling. "...But take your time choosing. The dining room is through that door; I'll be over there in a bit."

She points to a glass door leading to a lit room and disappears in that direction with her tray. I choose an African dish, the description of which isn't entirely clear to me since it is written in a language I don't speak, and follow her into the dining room. Louise is sitting at one of the tables by the window.

"Sit down!" she prompts me.

This time I look at her myself with a smile and ask casually:

"Do you always speak to people you've just met in such a commanding tone?"

She looks up from her plate and I notice her cheeks turning red.

“Oh, excuse moi,” she says, visibly flustered, “that wasn’t what I meant! I live in a large family, and I’m the oldest of six siblings, you know. I have four younger brothers, and one of them looks a lot like you. I’m used to keeping things tidy since our mother passed away,” she rattles off quickly, looking at me with wide eyes. “Please don’t be angry,” she adds in a deliberately quiet voice.

It's my turn to feel insecure now.

"I'm sorry, I mean about your mother..." I say quietly. "No, it doesn't really bother me. I just noticed it. I also have a younger brother, but no sister, and my mom never speaks to me in that tone..." I explain, placing my tray on the table in front of her. "Bon appétit!" I add.

Louise looks at me intently and continues eating without replying. I decide to enjoy my meal first.

"So you eat here often?" I ask when we're almost finished.

"Only when I have the late bus tour; I usually eat at home with my family," she replies. "Today you were one of the few people who came along. The trip would have been canceled if you hadn't signed up. I only came because of you, so to speak..." she says, and I'm not quite sure how to interpret her smile. "So," she continues, after putting her tray down, "it would only be fair to know why, wouldn't it? Where are you actually going?"

"I'm going to Africa, to Burkina Faso to be precise. But the next leg of my journey takes me via Avignon to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer."

"Africa?" Louise says, letting out a loud, high-pitched whistle. "Aha, so you won't be getting any further today. Do you already know where you'll be staying?"

“Yes, I’ve booked a room at a local guesthouse, it’s just around the corner…”

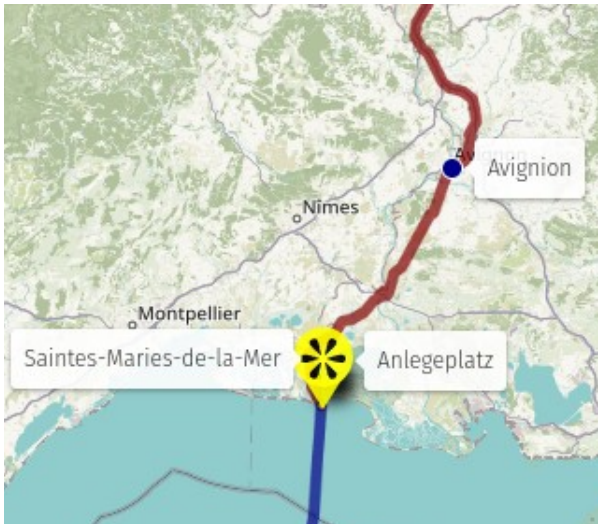
“Why are you planning such a long journey? It would take far too long for me, and then there are all those transfers from one InterMod to the next…” she inquires.

“Well, I think it’s simply time for me to leave home,” I say, attempting to use grand words. I realize that I like Louise. “For one thing, I’m driven by curiosity, for another, I want to learn more about my African roots, and incidentally, I’ll also be working on a project that I find very exciting,” I explain, convinced of myself and my trip.

“Okay, that sounds like nothing could stop you from continuing your journey…” Louise laughs. “Great, Mika, I see I can’t really help you much,” she says, standing up firmly. “Then I’ll drive the bus back to Vienne. I wish you a good night here and safe travels on your very long journey.”

"Thank you Luise, have a safe trip home," I said to her as I said goodbye.

I can still feel her warm handshake for a while, almost until the bus disappears around the next corner. I have a feeling I might have missed an opportunity. But I'm too tired to dwell on it. I put my tray in the return box and head towards the guesthouse.



Avignon – Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer

Avignon and Beyond

Half past four in the morning. My communicator goes off. I do my morning ablutions in the communal bathroom. It's quiet here. There's no one else in sight. I pack my things in the small room and walk somewhat pensively into the dining room. An older man is sitting at one of the small round tables, drinking something from a blue cup. A plate and cutlery are in front of him. *›He's probably already finished...‹* I think to myself. At the food counter, I manage to grab two croissants and some fruit spread. I try to get a cup of tea from the beverage dispenser next to it. *›Damn, it's probably broken,‹* I think, and am about to leave without tea.

„"Try putting a cup under it... here, take this one," the older man says to me, holding out a blue cup.

Behind him, on the wall, I see a shelf I hadn't noticed before.

"Thank you..." I reply, placing the cup in the machine.

Indeed, the boiling hot water flows into the cup and a tea bag plops into it.

“Excuse me, but I’m probably not quite awake yet…” I try to say to the helpful man, but he has already disappeared.

›Where did he go?‹ I put my cup and food down on one of the small round tables and sit down, just as the man before me had done. I slept well, but I don't feel particularly rested. I'm not quite there yet. I take a sip of tea and let the text archive list more unread notebook entries from my recent searches. There are quite a few. With the croissant in my hand, I continue reading.

> *November 25, 2032*
>
> *Today I received a letter. I was speechless when I saw Klaus, the postman. We know each other from the demonstrations. He came especially to deliver the letter to me. He said he had stopped by the*

post office to pick up some personal belongings he still had in his locker there, and found the place open and in disarray. Only my letter was still intact in one of the shipping crates; all the others had been burned outside. He also told me that armed groups were rioting in the city and were now fighting each other over the last remaining food in the already looted supermarkets. It was now life-threatening to go into the city, especially at night. The police can't be everywhere at once.

The letter was announcing my dismissal at the beginning of January 2033 and was already dated July. It doesn't matter anymore anyway. We have other things to worry about here than going to work for money.

Our supplies, whether bought or grown by Adina and Noram over the summer, are running low. We've been eating very rationed for a long time now. Noram and I are constantly out in the countryside looking for something to eat. We still have some canned goods, but we're lacking fruit and vegetables… Adina has preserved some things in jars and stored them, but I'm not sure if that will last us until spring. I'm already worried about Arthur, even though he's holding up well and isn't complaining at all.

Noram somehow managed to get hold of a satellite phone and was able to charge it with electricity from our solar panels. He was also able to connect via satellite and listen to news from the USA. Admittedly, only a little information, but it was something. What he heard, however, offered little joy and even less hope. The energy supply is clearly becoming increasingly unreliable all over the world. Even in the USA and Central America, the already highly vulnerable power grid is collapsing.

My biggest worry is the lack of drinking water. So far, we've been able to rely on various supplies we'd stockpiled. My old water purification kit for camping trips also helped when we collected rainwater. But there's no well nearby that we can access. We all stink because washing and showering are a luxury we can no longer afford. It's all

about quick washes. What makes me think is how quickly we've gotten used to it. When I think that I used to shower every day…

Fortunately, the cold has been fairly bearable so far, thanks in part to the small wood-burning stove with oven in the house. But it's only November, and I don't know how cold this winter will actually get.

I actually expected this entry to appear in my last search, which was about energy supply. The keyword search in the archive could still be improved. I'm enjoying my tea very much, and I realize that there were obviously times when it was a pure luxury to be able to brew a cup of tea and then drink it in peace.

January 17, 2033

We might have enough potatoes and carrots for four weeks, but only if there's just one hot meal a day for each of us. I never thought it would come to this so quickly. Yesterday, I went out with Adina to the surrounding villages. Noram wasn't feeling well and stayed home with Arthur. We knocked on almost every door, trying to get something to eat. But we weren't the only ones looking. We saw several people along the way, but they all avoided getting too close, so we couldn't speak to them. They looked very neglected, that's for sure. But I suspect we didn't look particularly healthy either, and certainly not clean.

Only a few people answered us through the locked door, and even fewer had opened it. They themselves didn't look particularly well-fed. Most of those who did answer simply said they were sorry, because »we have nothing left either«. One man who did open his door only glanced at us briefly and then closed it again without a word. Only at three larger farms were we eyed somewhat suspiciously and asked if we had anything to trade; no one wanted money. You can't eat money. Money is worthless now.

All in all, we received about three kilograms of potatoes and roughly the same amount of carrots. An old woman gave us two large onions.

Noram overheard some news reports and mentioned that the mar-

kets in Asia had also collapsed. Is that relevant to us here?

I'm more worried about our own health. It's cold and damp outside now. The wood-burning stove will be worth it, if we can find enough wood for it. It's a good thing we don't have to live right in the city center. No one from the neighborhood is going into town anymore, and everyone's afraid that those still living there would end up on our doorstep, armed and unfriendly…

Yesterday I spoke with Volker, whose house and garden are next to ours. He lives there with his elderly mother. He didn't ask for anything or make any requests. He just mentioned, almost casually, that his mother, given her current situation, most likely wouldn't live to see spring. She needed a doctor, but he was in town and the doctors' offices were closed, and the hospital was in a state of utter chaos. I remained silent, unsure what kind of help I could offer…

But we'll have to go back into town ourselves and look for something to exchange... spring is still a long way off.

I don't have much hope, mainly because I have absolutely no idea whether this situation will end soon, or is just the beginning of our end…

More about money. The topic still makes me uneasy. I haven't been able to develop any understanding of it. But what touches me even more is the relative calm with which Ethan writes about the difficulties and the resulting hopelessness. I keep trying to instinctively empathize with his situation. I can't. Just trying to imagine it is difficult. I've never felt hunger, and certainly never worried about my survival. His calmness sounds more like resignation, although the very fact that I exist now proves that he and my grandfather definitely hadn't given up... It's also confusing because I've never read his notes in chronological order before. I wouldn't have time for that right now anyway. I'll have to deal with that for now. But at some point, I'll have to read the whole story from beginning to end.

I'm still a bit disoriented, but time is passing very quickly. The teacup is empty and, rinsed, goes back on the shelf. One of the croissants was delicious; I'll pack the rest for later. I'm done here. *›I should probably get going soon, otherwise the train will leave without me.‹*

On the road to the InterMod station, several people are traveling with luggage. I even see a woman with a brown horse laden with sacks. The horse has no bridle. It walks beside her, and she even seems to be talking to it, gesturing slightly with her hands. Such a thing is rare to see. There are very few people left who keep other beings close to them and use them to help them with their tasks. I've only seen something like this once before, in one of the communities that support our learning campus. *›That must be a special relationship... the horse seems to be a good friend to her...‹*

I pause for a moment and take a deep breath. It's crisp and already quite bright. Not a cloud mars the blue sky. The InterMod station is visible. The train to Avignon has already arrived. There's only one man on the platform, who seems to be part of the train crew. I board the passenger car and look for one of the unoccupied sleeper berths. I'm in luck. There's no one else in the carriage at the moment. *›Catching up on an hour or two of sleep would be perfect right now.‹* I make myself comfortable on the narrow benches. *›Okay, set the alarm for 6:30, arrival in Avignon, and change trains for Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer.‹* In the luggage rack above me, I see a folded blanket. *›I don't need that,‹* I think to myself, and drift off to sleep.

◊ ◊ ◊

A jolt wakes me rudely. I glance outside. The sky is still overcast. The sun is nowhere to be seen. The air seems shrouded in a veil. In the far seats of the carriage, I see several other passengers still asleep. We're probably not quite in Avignon yet, but not far from the InterMod station. The tracks give it away. There are so many of them, so intertwined, that it can only be one large, old railway system. I get up and stretch considerably when my communicator decides it's finally time to wake me.

›The new day is off to a good start...‹ I tell myself and hurry to the toilet. Outside, I see reinforced concrete pylons passing by the window, and from the loudspeakers comes the unmistakable announcement: »Avignon«.

Back in my seat, I rummage through my backpack for the second croissant and, with a bottle of apple juice in hand, leave the train. I'm not entirely sure where the bus to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer is supposed to be. I'll have to do some searching, obviously, if I want to be there by noon today. A map on the wall explains fairly well where I need to go. It's not far. I have some time, it seems. I'm slightly excited at the thought that I'll soon be arriving practically at one end of Europe and that from there the journey will continue by sea. And, unexpectedly, I involuntarily think of Louise and

her handshake. *›You're impossible, Mika,‹* I think with a touch of guilt, imagining myself as a dashing sailor on a voyage around the world. *›Yes, exactly, Jean Passepartout and Giacomo Casanova rolled into one…‹*

Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer

›This InterMod station is brand new,‹ I remark in surprise. Unlike most InterMod stations, this one isn't an old train or bus depot, but rather a newly constructed building, clearly built with reused materials. The simple architecture also reveals that the builders were guided by modern living principles. While small and strictly functional, the building's form and design allow it to blend seamlessly into the surrounding landscape. The natural pastel color of the clay-plastered walls and the overall low height of the gently curved structure seem to organically connect the coastal land and the sea.

I go into the small room containing the automated food dispenser and get a local dish to satisfy my hunger. With my tray full, I sit down at one of the small tables. My gaze continues to wander over the room's design.

“Why are you looking so surprised?” my table neighbor asks me, who, like me, is having lunch from the local food dispenser station.

I flinch slightly, surprised to be addressed so directly.

“Joe…” the wiry man extends his hand to me.

“Mika…” I introduce myself in the same way. “I’ve never seen such a new InterMod station before?” I reply hesitantly. “What happened to the old one? Why wasn’t it used anymore?”

“Hello, Mika. Hmm… you’re probably not from around here, or history isn’t your strong suit…” he smiles at me and leans back comfortably. “The tsunami that ravaged the Mediterranean here decades ago,” he begins, “didn’t just destroy the port of Marseille. You should have heard of that. These are events that happened before your time, but they had a huge impact all over the world.”

“Oh, of course I’ve read about it. I mean, about what happened everywhere when the sea level rose back then. But I don’t know any details about what happened here. I therefore assume that the damage here must have been just as enormous…,” I reply thoughtfully.

"You can believe it! Not a single stone was left standing here, or rather, everything was underwater more or less overnight. We were forced to start from scratch. Take the port facilities for overseas shipping, for example. We had to rebuild them ten kilometers offshore, from here, to prevent something like this from happening again. Strictly speaking, the port is still in its original location; it's just that the sea level has risen considerably."

His outstretched arm points towards the harbor facilities, which can be glimpsed in the distance.

"The InterMod station was designed so that we can transfer to ferries and boats that then connect us to the port. The heavy loads are transported by these special container barges."

He points further, not far from the InterMod station, to the four cranes that sway slightly back and forth in the waves.

"Oh, I thought the cranes would be on land at first... But what a huge undertaking to rebuild an entire port facility," I say in amazement.

"Um, Mika? You definitely weren't born around here, were you?" Joe observes, smiling broadly at me.

"That's right. Neither were you, probably! Do you live here, or are you just passing through like me?" I reply with a question of my own.

"That's right too. My parents came from North Africa, Tunisia to be precise. I've lived here for many years now and work on one of the barges," he tells me proudly. "And you? Where are you headed?"

I get asked this question all the time, I notice, wherever I go. I don't know how to tell the story anymore. I choose my words carefully:

“My maternal ancestors also come from Africa, and I finally want to get to know this part of my family better. That's why I'm currently on my way to Burkina Faso.”

“That sounds like a trip around the world! You do realize that you can only get to Africa by ship? So you have to go to the port? Then you could come out with me on the »Fabienne«, my cargo barge,” Joe says in the same breath.

“Thank you, that’s a very kind offer, if that would be possible. But I first need to check how my passage to Ghana will work out,” I replied, immediately pulling out my communicator.

The device shows me the »Colombo« as a connection to Ghana, a Flettner rotor freighter that will dock tomorrow and take on cargo and passengers.

"I'm continuing my journey tomorrow on the »Colombo«, it looks like. Are you also heading to the port tomorrow on your »Fabienne«?"

"Sure, Mika, I have two trips to the port tomorrow morning. Just come here at ten and I'll pick you up. The »Colombo« is a great ship. I've heard it can make it all the way to West Africa in six weeks if the winds are favorable," Joe says, getting up, obviously to leave.

"I will. Thanks! See you tomorrow then," I reply, watching him disappear towards the bus stop.

I vaguely remember seeing something about this tsunami while skimming through the many entries in the notebook archive. I'll try typing in »tsunami« and »mediterranean«.

> *March 21, 2043*
>
> *I've been back in Walzbachtal since yesterday and I'm incredibly happy that Noram and Rachida arrived before me. I took the same route back as I did on the way here. I traveled through Western Asia and Eastern Europe, and this time the trip took me almost eight weeks.*
>
> *An overseas trip wasn't really feasible this time either.*
>
> *I didn't often have the time or inclination to write while traveling. I was more interested in talking to the people in the very different communities who hosted me and simply letting their thoughts and opinions sink in.*
>
> *I was already in Cairo last November when I received an email from Noram saying that he and Rachida were traveling through Italy to Walzbachtal. When I heard about the massive tsunami, I was very worried about their safety and tried to contact them. But, as I later learned from Noram's reply, they had both left Genoa for Bologna a week before the tsunami, where they planned to launch their joint project with the local community.*

As subsequent analysis revealed, it originated north of Algeria, where Africa is pushing under Europe's coast, and in a short time destroyed all European port facilities within a relatively direct line of sight, from Barcelona to Pisa. The giant wave was preceded by an earthquake of magnitude 8.4 on the Richter scale, recorded by all active stations in the world. A historic event indeed.

The second global meeting of communities in Cairo was attended by over 500 representatives from communities in all regions of the world. From the outset, there was fundamental agreement that humans, as living beings, must integrate themselves into the cycle of all life and that all other living beings on the planet must be considered equal to humans. This, all believed, would ensure the survival of every species.

Throughout the entire process and for all topics discussed, dialogue according to David Bohm was used as the communication method. The majority of participants were familiar with the necessary dialogic approach, as it had been frequently discussed and practiced in radio meetings. The agenda items were discussed in parallel in numerous small groups until a relative consensus was reached. In the general assembly, an iterative consent process was applied, allowing a general direction for development at a global level to be outlined for each topic, based on the insights gained in the groups.

It was jointly recognized that humanity's capacity for consciousness places a special responsibility on it, as a species, to protect all life – a responsibility that humanity, as a species, still needs to further develop to fulfill…

In my opinion, this formulation very essentially describes the level of awareness and insight of the conference participants. It means that the participants implicitly recognized that while the human species possesses the potential for further development, it has definitely not yet been able to fully realize this potential; in other words, humanity has not yet reached the end of its evolution, especially regarding its spiritual maturity.

I allowed the results of the discussions to sink in sufficiently and also discussed them extensively on the way with people who weren't present but showed interest. In my perception, since the global meeting in Cairo, there is greater clarity about the rules humanity must follow to survive successfully on the planet. However, many points of contention remain regarding how these rules should be implemented and whether exceptions could be made. Here, in our community, the differences of opinion have now been largely resolved.

A crucial point, repeatedly emphasized by all speakers and discussed throughout the conference, was the following: To survive, humanity as a whole must adhere to certain fundamental rules of conduct. However, these rules represent only a general framework that can be applied locally based on conscious voluntary participation and contextual adaptation. In other words, it is the responsibility of each community to determine precisely how it applies the rules within its local context, as long as the overall mutual equilibrium of all beings remains intact. This clarification also provides the tools necessary to resolve any potential disputes between neighboring communities.

I have started recording a series of lectures on video in order to make them available to other communities online. They can be downloaded and viewed offline as reports and/or documentation of my views. Streaming is not possible and not desired for reasons of efficiency and resources.

Spiritual development is now being recognized more frequently and openly as very important by a growing number of people. Adina also organizes exchange groups with neighboring communities to create a space of trustfulness for shared exchange, where people's spiritual development can take place.

›My family seems to have escaped the tsunami in time...‹ It touches me deeply, even though, from today's perspective, I had nothing to do with it. *›But this idea of a safe space for spiritual development...‹* whispers a voice in my brain, *›that seems to have only become common knowledge back then.‹* I also find it fascinating to experience,

almost live, how my ancestors viewed spiritual development during that time of transformation. For my generation, it's normal to see humans as beings on an uninterrupted path of spiritual evolution. I'm noticing that just thinking about it is putting me in a meditative state.

But now isn't the right time for that. I shake myself awake as if from a dream and push it aside. *›So, dear communicator, where are we staying tonight?‹* I stubbornly distract myself and check the travel details again. My communicator doesn't show any available guesthouses or private accommodations, only the location of the local notice board. *›Seems pretty full here.‹* I head towards the notice board, which is located behind the harbor master's office. It's covered in requests and offers, but I don't really understand what people are looking for and what they're expecting to find. I take a picture of the many notices with my communicator and ask it to scan for an accommodation offer. After a short time, it displays »Zero results«. *›Damn, I hope your French really is better than mine,‹* I grumble briefly. *›Maybe I should try my own note...‹* I write »Chambre recherchée pour une nuit« as legibly as I can on one of the blank slips of paper available at the side of the board and conspicuously pin it to the middle of the bulletin board. *›Maybe I should also include my communicator number...‹* Thought, and done.

I'll check the harbor master's office again; maybe someone there can help me, but the place seems deserted. I'm trying to figure out how to get a tent and a sleeping bag. My communicator shows the nearest ClothBot somewhere nearby. I find the device hidden behind a partition. I enter the sleeping bag's dimensions. I don't need a tent, as there are plenty of bunks available in the waiting area. I'm sure I can sleep here.

While the ClothBot is finishing the sleeping bag, I continue my walk through the small town towards the sea. It is already early evening and the sky is turning blood red to the west. I am a little tired. *›I could actually fall asleep right now...‹* I sit down on a bench and enjoy the peace and the setting sun.

The past few days have been quite eventful, and I'm longing for some peace and quiet. *›But that's probably not going to happen,‹* I suspect, imagining what it will be like on the ship starting tomorrow. I've never been to sea before. In fact, I've never even really seen the sea myself. It doesn't surprise me how I perceive it now, from a bench in a harbor, since I've often seen images of it in documentaries. What

captivates me, though, is the smell. It's so new, in fact, that I have to make a real effort to convince myself it's coming from the sea and not from something on land. It's difficult, because where I'm sitting, the wind seems to be blowing from the land. I had expected, as the books say, that the sea breeze would cool me down. I also see very few seagulls. I expected to see many more. But the smell… I can't quite put my finger on what it actually smells like, it seems so varied. When I close my eyes and just listen to the sound of the waves, all I see in my mind's eye is a black wall, somehow matte, like a cotton ball, and I'd love to snuggle up in it and…

„Beep!“

›... Beep?‹ My communicator just received a signal from the ClothBot that my sleeping bag is finished and ready for pickup. I get up and hurry a bit. It's a few hundred meters to the harbor master's office, and I want to avoid the ClothBot disassembling my newly created sleeping bag back into its components because it wasn't picked up. That's one of the features I helped develop myself in an international working group back then. *›What goes around comes around...‹* I think with a grin and try to walk even faster. I can already see the harbor master's office, but it's still quite a way off. *›What was the default setting? Ten minutes?‹* The street along the beach is deserted at the moment. Only the café next to the harbor master's office seems to be occupied. The door is open, and I can hear music. *›Four more minutes.‹* I can already feel the sweat trickling down my back. The day wasn't hot, but it was humid, and the evening breeze isn't really cooling down at the moment. There's the door. *›What?‹* An older woman is standing in the doorway, obviously holding my new sleeping bag. She looks at me calmly and says in a low voice:

"Do you need somewhere to sleep, my boy?"

"How…" I begin, unprepared, and realize that this wouldn't have been the right answer. "Yes, of course, how do you know?" I ask, after my breathing has calmed down a bit.

The old woman shows me the note I recently posted on the bulletin board and says:

"I carefully removed the sleeping bag from the machine. Some idiot programmed it to dismantle whatever it's just created after ten minutes if it's not taken out. That's not enough time here, since nobody wants to wait next to the thing. We tried to change it, but it doesn't work... or we just don't know how... Is this your sleeping bag? I assume," she concludes, handing it to me without waiting for my reply.

I accept the sleeping bag and at the same time wonder why the old woman is looking at me so amused.

"What is it? Have you lost your voice? Would you like a place to sleep under the roof? Then just come with me," she says, turns around, and starts walking at a leisurely pace.

"Wait a moment!" I say, jolted awake. "I can help you configure the machine correctly. How long should the waiting time be?"

"You can do that?" the old woman asks, turning to me. "Yes, of course you can. All young people can do that sort of thing, can't they? But there aren't many of them left around here. They're scattered to the four winds..." she says in a sad voice. "It should wait at least half an hour, preferably an hour. It won't hurt anyone. Can you set that?"

"Yes, I can. It won't take long," I reply quickly and turn towards the harbor master's waiting room.

"Slow down, son, I can't go that fast, and I want to see what you're doing. I may not be the youngest anymore, but I'm not stupid either..." she chuckles as we go inside together.

"Look," I say when we're standing in front of the machine's control panel. "You just have to go into General Settings, then Time Configuration, then enter the desired waiting time, and..."

"Son, when I said I wasn't stupid, I wasn't joking. We tried it here, too. It doesn't work..." the old woman says, shaking her head. "Try it. I want to see if it works for you."

I'm doing that too, and it's not working, and I know why. It actually requires an administrator password to change the factory settings. I have one, but how do I do it without embarrassing myself in front of the old woman by admitting I was the idiot who programmed it?

“Oh, …” I try cautiously, “I’d forgotten… right, I saw that at school once. It takes an administrator to change this configuration. There must be one here too. Do you perhaps know who received the device back when it was installed?”

My hope that this person might not be nearby, since otherwise the matter would have been settled long ago, evaporates when the old woman announces in an ecstatic voice:

"She's standing in front of you, my boy. But I've forgotten the password they gave me back then. I'm not that young and spry anymore, you understand."

›I guess I'm not getting out of this one today...‹ I think resignedly. *›If I'm going to get a place to stay, I'll have to get through this somehow.‹* I take a deep breath and start slowly:

“I just happened to remember the password that was used back in school. Maybe it'll work here too. I can try it out if you like…” I say, looking at her with my most innocent expression.

“Yes, please, try it. It can't hurt, can it?” she says, positioning herself next to me so she can see everything I do.

In twenty seconds it's all over and we're already on our way to the old woman's house. She hasn't said a word since I changed the settings. It seems rather odd to me, but whatever. Good thing it's over. Only when she opens the door to the room where I'm supposed to sleep do I realize my miscalculation.

“Son,” she says to me, giving me a slightly askance look, “I told you I’m not stupid, didn’t I? The way you’re handling this thing, you must have done way more with it in school than just looked at it once… But whatever. Thanks anyway. And don’t take the »idiot« thing seriously,” she adds as a final remark. “We’re all human, and humans make mistakes. But being able to admit those mistakes is something we also have to learn, and as I’ve just realized, that’s still not taught in schools…” Then she closes the door and is gone.

›Phew... that'll be a nice bedtime story,‹ I think to myself, and flop down onto the bed. The room is small and very sparsely furnished. But it's clean, as expected, and I probably won't need my sleeping bag since the bed has fresh sheets. I have a feeling I should call someone, but the feeling is so vague that I don't pursue it. I absentmindedly tap the communicator and accidentally open the archive app, which is showing the latest reading suggestion from Ethan's notebooks. Let's see...

> *June 23, 2036*
>
> *Today in our radio meeting, we compiled information on the estimated death rate in the regions we are familiar with. The result is appalling: The estimate for Germany alone is over thirty million dead since the beginning of the crisis. Most people have supposedly died*

in the major cities due to lack of water, disease, hunger, or acts of violence. Furthermore, it seems that state power no longer truly exists —at least, it is not felt by the participating communities.

However, it is also reported that, particularly in cities, there are groups of people who are seizing local power by force and, under the pretext of maintaining the old »law and order« structures, presenting themselves as representatives of state power. The natural reaction of those who still try to live in urban areas plagued by such »saviors« is to flee the city. The new »rulers«, who depend on local workers, are attempting to prevent this exodus from the city using extreme methods. It's truly not a pleasant development... the accounts of those who have managed to escape suggest that widely avoiding urban areas will have a positive impact on the chances of successfully establishing a community.

The darkness is slowly receding. After the rain, a small patch of blue sky appeared for the first time today, which, although it disappeared quickly, gave us all hope. The volcanic ash is also good for the soil. We're trying to grow vegetables outside again, especially potatoes, carrots, and celery. Everyone is pitching in.

It's also good that, according to radio communications, there are now almost one hundred communities in Germany alone trying to survive. We are in direct contact with over twenty of them. We also have direct personal contact with twelve communities.

I returned from Bretten yesterday. A plucky little community has found a good, hidden place to survive. Only twenty people are still there, and they are very cautious. They have good reason to be cautious, as there are still many raids by armed groups who use violence and cruelty to try to bring established communities under their control. For some communities, such a raid has meant the end, as the few survivors have told us.

Against the backdrop of enormous problems due to water scarcity, environmental and weather disasters, crop failures, and armed conflicts over resources, it seems almost impossible that things will im-

prove. Nevertheless, I have the feeling that more and more people in different places are beginning to rethink their approach and are trying to act cooperatively with one another and with their environment. Adina and I are talking to anyone who wants to listen to us (via radio) about the changes that are necessary to survive through cooperation and solidarity.

It seems we've reached the point and the critical mass where this new perception will spread independently, solely through personal example. I only hope that this will lead to more and more people embracing this new way of perceiving the world and that they will then share their insights with others.

›That fits perfectly right now...‹ I have to admit to myself. *›What was desired and dreamed of in my great-grandfather's time has still not been fully achieved... obviously not in my case...‹* This realization seems important to me right now.

The smell of salt water drifts in through the slightly open window, and the sound of the waves invites me to reflect. I've never considered whether or when I might have to answer for my actions. I don't feel guilty, but what the old woman said to me really hit home. Fifty years ago, a transformation began that I can no longer truly perceive, since everything is commonplace and, so to speak, normal to me, something my great-grandfather could only dream of back then. I realize that the transformation he writes about, that it would take generations, is primarily one of inner attitude, and that it hasn't even been fully completed within me yet. Nevertheless, I feel at peace inside, and tomorrow it will thereby go on…

Ship ahoy!

From Ship to Ship

I see that Joe is already on his »Fabienne« and has everything prepared to cast off. He sees me and raises his hand in greeting.

"Hello Mika!" he calls to me. "Come on, jump over here, we'll be leaving with the next load."

"Good morning, Joe," I greet him. "It's great that you're taking me along to the »Colombo«."

Joe watches me as I awkwardly climb over the railing of the crane boat. Once I'm there, his gaze makes me feel a little uncomfortable, and to break the silence, I simply ask the first thing that comes to mind:

"Do you know what the weather will be like for the next few days?"

"You're not quite awake yet, Mika," Joe grins broadly, turning his gaze away from me to stare intently at the morning sky. "Your communicator will show you that today and tomorrow you can expect moderate winds and mild temperatures around eighteen degrees... but the day after tomorrow it will get unpleasant, with gale-force winds and temperatures dropping to twelve degrees."

"Aha..." I say, pretending to consider this while also looking at the horizon.

The engines of the »Fabienne« suddenly hum louder, and I see the pier slowly moving away from the boat. We're slowly turning towards the sun. I already know that it's the boat that's moving, not the dock. However, I can't shake this inverted, rather confusing perception.

“Is that where the outline of the »Colombo« is coming into view?” I ask, just to be able to concentrate on something else and distract myself from the discomfort in my stomach.

“Exactly, she docked right there at the big mooring line last night.”

In the foreground on the left, the silhouette of a ship is visible, significantly larger than the »Fabienne«. It resembles the image I found in MultiNet while preparing for the trip.

“Wow, that looks huge, these rotors are incredibly large,” I shout against the wind and hold onto the railing, because the small crane boat has already picked up speed.

›I think I should close my mouth after this moment of wonder,‹ I realize. I feel a certain unsteadiness in my knees and, if I'm honest, I'm extremely excited and even a little scared. Of what? I can't really say. Something new seems to be beginning, something different from anything I've known before. *›Isn't that why I left home?‹*

"Aha, so you can still be surprised," Joe observes, and I surprise myself by putting my hand over my mouth to make sure it's closed.

"We already unloaded the cargo the »Colombo« brought this morning; now it's her turn to be loaded," Joe says, pretending not to notice my embarrassment.

"You mentioned two trips yesterday. Is this the last one?" I bravely chime in again.

"You were paying attention! Yes, this is the last one, and the trickiest."

Joe leans out from his command console and looks anxiously into the cargo hold of his »Fabienne«.

"Do you see those crates down there?"

"Yes, they seem to have been packed very carefully. Is there anything fragile in there?" I shout back, not really understanding what he means.

"Exactly, that's why I'll be glad when everything's safely on the »Colombo« later..." he says, looking up at the mast, "...but the wind is still calm! That means we have a chance of loading the crates without damage."

"What all is loaded in the hold of your ship? And how do you know if the wind will stay calm?" I try to get more information.

"Ha, good questions!" he exclaims. "According to the shipping documents, we've loaded these strange transparent panels that generate electricity from sunlight, and the plants underneath also get sunlight to grow. And the wind speed thing is more a matter of experience. If you've been at sea long enough, you can figure it out. And by the way, the anemometer is up in the mast..." he adds with a grin.

“Solar panels? I know they need solar panels for a project in Burkina Faso. So they're coming along too? Great. I actually already knew that. That's why I chose this passage. I'll be helping to set up the solar power plant there,” I reply proudly. “How do you manage to transfer these huge packages without them getting damaged?”

“We do it with our two cranes on board. The »Colombo« only has a small crane for

loading provisions and can't handle such weights safely. The cargo is usually loaded or unloaded with cranes on land, or, as in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, with our »Fabienne«. The »Fabienne«, as you've probably noticed, is quite small compared to an ocean-going freighter, but it's sturdy and powerful!" Joe laughs, his face beaming with unmistakable pride.

"Why aren't there cranes on the big container ships? Does that leave more cargo capacity?" I ask.

"Yes, that's certainly part of it, but more importantly, the stability in rough seas is significantly better without the heavy crane superstructures," Joe replies. "Look, please, on the starboard side, how much space is left between us and the big one," he suddenly asks me. "I can't see how close we are… Starboard is to the right!" he calls after me.

"Thanks, I already knew that," I say, and, leaning over the side, I start calling out the distance: "Five meters… Four meters…"

"Okay, now I see it too," Joe reports back over the noise of the engines. "Could you please hand the line in front of you to the man on the »Colombo«?"

I take the thick rope and tie it to the thinner line the sailor had lowered from the railing. The man takes the line and ties the »Fabienne« to the large cargo ship. Joe walks to the bow and hands over a second line. In no time, the »Fabienne« is secured, and Joe gets to work with the cranes and the cargo. He controls the tall cranes with a remote control, moving the cargo from the hold to over the edge of the »Colombo«.

A few commands are shouted, and the sailor waves to Joe. He's to lower the cargo slowly so it can be loaded into the cargo hold. This is repeated a few times until suddenly the cranes lock back into their resting position. I'm amazed at how easily everything just happened; in my perception, it was very quick and routine.

"Ready!" Joe announces, standing on his small bridge with his fists on his hips. "Now it's your turn," he says, looking at me seriously.

"How do I get over to the other ship?" I ask him, feeling a queasy feeling in my stomach at the thought of having to be hoisted across by crane.

"Try climbing," comes the cheeky reply, accompanied by Joe's laughter.

He stands next to me with a thick stack of documents in his hand, flashing his white teeth. Once he's had his fill of my uncertainty, he follows along in a slightly calmer

tone.

"Wait a bit, then they'll let down a footbridge. I'll come with you. I need to hand over the shipping documents and get a receipt for the loading. Then we'll go up together and I'll introduce you to captain Rowanson."

"They'll let down a what?" I ask, somewhat reassured.

"Just look up, then you'll see what it is," Joe says.

I follow the direction of his index finger and see that a movable ramp has been lowered from the side of the »Colombo«, which I hadn't noticed before. We climb the rather steep ramp and enter the ship's hull through an open steel door.

The sailor, who had already helped with mooring the ships, assists us and says kindly:

"Come with me, the captain is already waiting for you. Do you have the shipping documents with you?"

"Aye," Joe replies.

We follow him towards the bridge. Only now do I realize how large the cargo ship actually is. The sight of the four Flettner rotors, one at each corner of the freighter, is overwhelming in itself. Each is about thirty meters high and five meters in diameter. They frame the deck, and I have the feeling of somehow walking onto a central stage, where the Flettner rotors form the high tiers of a theater. *›In which a play is being performed, now with me also playing an important role...‹* I have to chuckle to myself. I once saw a picture of the old Heidelberg State Theater building on MultiNet, as it originally looked before its decay. The stage wasn't in the middle there, but that's what comes to mind.

Around me, there's a flurry of activity. *›Maybe the cruise will start soon?‹* another thought creeps in. I feel myself getting homesick. *›How long have I been gone? It's only been a few days, right?‹*

"Ah, there you are!" a woman calls out to us somewhat impatiently. "I'm Leandra Rowanson, captain of the »Colombo«. Welcome!" she says, looking me straight in the eye.

"Hello Leandra, here are the papers from the last two trips. I'll also need your acceptance certificate," Joe chimes in.

"Hello, I'm Mika and I'd like to sail with you to Accra," I say, a little uncertainly.

The captain ignores Joe's advance and turns back to me.

"Okay, so you're Mika! I answered your request back then. You're very welcome," she says, eyeing me with a friendly but very sharp gaze. "We could really use your help on board; one of the sailors is ill and was already absent this morning during loading," she adds, as if to make sure I'm fully aware of everything from the beginning.

"That's wonderful. I'd like to help and learn something here. What kind of work do you have for me?" I ask, squeezing the outstretched hand.

Captain Rowanson's handshake is firm, and her gaze still hasn't left my face. In a way, she reminds me of my mother when she communicates the work schedule from our community office.

“First Joe gets his signatures, then I’ll show you the »Colombo«,” she replies after a few long seconds and finally turns to Joe without giving me a clear answer.

Joe and Leandra get the paperwork done relatively quickly, and they say goodbye like old friends. I take a deep breath. Joe's last words before he disembarks are surprisingly for me:

"Mika, it's nice that we ran into each other. I wish you a safe crossing and perhaps we'll see each other again on your return journey," he says, and I can tell he means it.

"Thank you, I hope so too. I won't soon forget the fascinating insights you've given me over the last two days." We shake hands goodbye, and then he's gone.

Leaning over the railing, I watch the fluid maneuvers of the »Fabienne« as it quickly disappears. The view from up here is fantastic. The cargo seems to be already secured on board. Two people are still securing the footbridge on deck and then vanish from my sight. *›I think it's about to start...‹* I think to myself. *›So, for weeks now, no solid ground under my feet, just water...‹* I'm feeling a little uneasy.

"If you want to watch the departure from up here on the bridge, I'll show you our ship later," I hear Leandra's voice behind me.

"Oh yes," I stammer, startled, "that would be great."

In my mind, this woman was just stored as a ship's captain, and that fills me with immense respect.

The Camargue coastline stretches eastward on the horizon. The »Colombo« slowly

picks up speed, and the harbor island soon lies far behind us. The sky is still clear and blue, and only a few seagulls make their presence known with their cries. The queasy feeling in my stomach that I had on the »Fabienne« has subsided. *›It's not so bad,‹* I tell myself, trying to take in the scenery, aware that this is a farewell. *›A farewell for now?‹*

The large container ship feels like solid ground, at least now that the sea is so calm. And yet, I feel a slight tingling in my stomach and legs. *›What's that vibration?‹* My gaze drifts to the rotors. *›So that's the reason!‹* I suspect that the rotational movement is transmitted as a vibration to the entire ship. The marking on the rotors clearly shows the rotation.

"The vibrations stop at a certain speed. The rotor damping hasn't been adjusted for months. But you get used to the humming quickly and soon stop noticing it," explains Leandra, who has suddenly reappeared next to me.

"Would that be something for me to do? I'm quite knowledgeable in mechanical engineering," I hear myself say, while seriously wondering if I'll ever get used to the captain's sudden appearance.

"Yes, I noticed that when I read your request, and that made my decision to offer you a ride all the easier. I hope you can help us out here, too. Anyway, the damping is the least of my ship's problems. I was thinking more about the maintenance and repair of the rotors. Would that be something you'd be interested in?"

In Leandra's voice I recognize not a request, but a command which I can hardly resist.

“Yes, that sounds exciting. I’d love to,” I agree.

“Okay. Then that’s settled. You’ll take care of the two front ones. You can find maintenance and repair manuals in our library,” Leandra concludes firmly. “Now come on, Mika, I’ll give you a quick tour of the ship and your accommodation here on board.”

She leaves the bridge without waiting for me, and I follow her as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if I've always followed instructions like this. *›Phew…!‹* I'm a little surprised by my own reaction.

The path leads up steep stairs and through long corridors, past various areas. Leandra strides confidently ahead, not looking back to see if I'm following. She opens a large door, points into the room beyond, and then turns to me. For the first time since

the bridge, our eyes meet. I have the feeling she's scrutinizing me again.

"Here, our canteen. Breakfast from five, lunch from twelve, and dinner after six," she rattles off in a businesslike tone, before turning to the room. "Hello Horst, what's for lunch today?" she greets the cook, who can be glimpsed at the other end of the kitchen amidst hanging pans and soup spoons.

"Same as yesterday!" he replies cheekily. "For the meat-eaters, there's lasagna or fish; the others get vegetables."

Then, laughing and seemingly unfazed, he turns to his colleagues, who are busy with various activities in the ship's galley.

“His food is much better than his jokes…”, Leandra comments in a surprisingly gentle voice and continues the tour with me before I could even say hello.

The corridors widen, and there are signs at the intersections to help with orientation. We're now turning towards the team rooms. *›The tour was short.‹* Leandra opens one of the staterooms.

"This will be your home for the next few weeks. Cabin nine. Easy to remember, right?" she smiles.

"Okay, yes, I can remember that. The library isn't far either, if I'm interpreting the signs correctly. But how do I get to the bow to the forward rotors?" I ask quickly, hoping for an answer before she disappears again.

"Just leave your things here for now. We'll take care of that after lunch. See you in the mess hall."

She looks me straight in the eyes for another moment, turns sharply on her heel, and leaves the area in the direction we came from.

›She's quite a sight...‹ I take a deep breath as I look around. *›My new home! Not bad at all! There's plenty of room.‹* A seating area, a desk with a monitor, the bed, and the wardrobe complete the interior. And all made from the same decorative wood. I leave my backpack and jacket in the room and look for a sign for the restroom in the hallway on my way to the mess hall.

◊ ◊ ◊

In the canteen, a dozen people are sitting at a long table. Leandra is among them, deep in conversation. Arriving at the food counter, I decide on the vegetable lasagna.

"New here?" an older man asks me as he fills my plate. "I'm Knut. When I'm not

serving food in the kitchen, I work in the ship's carpentry and joinery workshop. Have you seen your room? I made all the furniture."

"Don't show off like that, Knut!" Horst booms from the kitchen. "Why don't you help me with dessert?"

"Thanks, Knut, I'm Mika. Yes, I've already noticed the furniture in my room. It looks really good!" I thank him and head for the drinks counter.

"Just to your left, that's where you'll find the drinks," Knut calls after me and disappears into the kitchen.

I put yet a large glass of water on the tray and sit down at the long table. I look around and hope my face looks friendly. I've been told that I usually look rather serious when I'm surprised or unsure.

"Hi everyone, I'm Mika and I'll be with you until Accra!"

Everyone glances at me briefly and a friendly murmur welcomes me.

"Listen up, everyone!" Leandra calls out. "Mika, our new guy! Once he's settled in, he'll take over the maintenance of the front Flettner rotors. That way, at least the work from Pierre, who's unfortunately in the hospital, will be shared. Is there anything else Mika could do? He knows a thing or two about mechanical engineering and claimed he wasn't really busy enough with just the two rotors!" she grins at me challengingly.

"I could use some help in the workshop. We'll have to replace a few tools ourselves; they weren't included in the shipping documents this time. But we do have two dampers for the rotors on board now. Maybe Mika and Joshua can help with the replacement," says Knut, who has sat down next to me and places a fatherly hand on my shoulder.

"That's a great idea!" Leandra agrees. "Okay. Were you all paying attention? Then you know what to do," she continues emphatically, before turning back to her food.

Somehow I've already arrived, it seems, even though it's all happening so fast. No sooner was I on land than I'm out at sea, taking on tasks I never dreamed of. It must be meant to be.

On the left side, *›»to port«, as sailors say...‹*, there's a porthole through which you can see the sunlight reflected off the water. The waves are barely visible, and everything is calm at the moment. *›Ship ahoy!‹* I smile to myself, my mouth full of lasagna.

Flettner Rotors

I'm standing at the railing outside the mess hall, enjoying the breeze, which smells of salt and seaweed. After the rather substantial meal, it feels wonderful. The seagulls are already gone, and the coast is just a dark strip on the northern horizon. As I've just learned, I'm standing on the starboard side of the ship, and therefore in the shadow of the bridge. The midday sun is currently beating down fiercely on the steel plates of the »Colombo«, and I honestly don't wish I had to work there. *›The captain really put me on display in front of the crew...‹* I think to myself. I know it was meant as a compliment, but it also puts me under considerable pressure. If I understood correctly, Joshua, the tall young man with shoulder-length dark hair who was sitting at the table next to Leandra, should be contacting me any minute now. I'm supposed to start work with him. *›Settling in on the ship is pretty quick, isn't it?‹* The canteen door creaks behind me and a rough voice calls me.

“Hello Mika, shall we get right to work?” asks Joshua and heads towards the workshop without waiting.

›That seems to be the norm here,' I notice. *'Just ask something and don't wait for an answer, but just keep going... I wonder if that has something to do with the captain? Maybe it's rubbing off?‹* I follow Joshua into the workshop, where he gathers some tools and collects them in a rolling container.

“We’ll need this in a minute,” he beams at me, as if we were already best friends and had worked together a lot. He then attaches a small device to the rolling container. “Do you know what this little thing does?”

“No, not exactly, but I’m guessing it’s a control unit that’s linked to you?” I reply, a little embarrassed. *›Is he testing me, or what?‹*

“Exactly. The rolling container will follow me step by step until I detach the launcher,” he explains, pointing to one of the lockers in the workshop’s changing area. “You’ll also find work clothes and safety gear here. I hope you transferred your measurements correctly; then everything should fit. Your name is on the locker, too,” he says, responding to my somewhat confused look.

I find the locker and we change. I also put the thicker work jacket over my shoulders. *›Who knows when that might come in handy...‹*

"And here you also have a launcher; you can program it to yourself using the

communicator."

He holds out another item of the control unit to me and critically examines me for a few seconds until he finally seems satisfied with the result of my efforts.

"Come on, let's go up on the deck to the rotors, to soak up some more sun, warmth, and fresh air."

"That's a good idea, especially since I can't get enough of the view," I reply, happy to be getting back outside.

"You'll get there," Joshua murmurs and strides ahead briskly.

He seems five or six years older than me, and his athletic build and sun-tanned face suggest he's been working on this ship for a while. *›He must feel responsible for me,‹* I surmise as we trudge across the deck toward the bow. The rolling toolbox whizzes behind us, apparently anticipating and avoiding every obstacle, including myself, if I suddenly stop.

“Have you been on the »Colombo« for long?” I ask Joshua, just to say something for once.

“I’ve been here for three years now,” he replies without turning around. “And I get a huge amount of enjoyment out of this ship, and it’s a huge amount of work. But I think it wouldn’t be the same ship without this crew and our captain.”

“But if you’ve been at sea for three years, where do your family and friends live?”

“My wife Ava lives and works here on board, too. Most of our friends do as well. But our families live ashore. Once a year, we spend several weeks with them,” he tells me. “But some here on board, like you, are only here for one or a few passages; others do it for a while and then disappear again.”

“Do you already know how long you want to stay at sea?”

“No, Mika, that’s unpredictable. If my wife were to become pregnant, or if one of us were to become seriously ill, we would probably move back to land. But neither of those things has happened yet, so for now, we’re staying put.”

“Since I’ve been traveling, I’ve noticed that friendliness and helpfulness are highly valued everywhere. Here on board, too, I received a warm welcome,” I observe, more for myself than anything else.

“Yes, that’s how people are when things are going well for them,” Joshua replies. “But it can be different. It’s not like that everywhere, even though we’re taught during

our apprenticeships that this way of life is good and can be found everywhere. When you've been at sea for so long, you meet a lot of people, and even if some things are common everywhere, you can't expect everyone to live the same way…" he adds, and it makes me very curious about what he means.

"I don't quite understand…" I begin to ask, but Joshua isn't willing to delve into the topic.

"So, let's take the starboard rotor apart now…" he says, turning away from me.

We've reached the front of the ship and the rotor on the starboard side has already been switched off. The indicator shows that nothing is turning anymore. *›The wind is blowing much stronger up here now; good thing I brought my thick work jacket.‹*

"The replacement ball bearings for the rotors arrived with the first delivery this morning," Joshua explains. "Before we can remove the old ones, we have to take off the casing. Could you please download the rotor manual from the library to your communicator? Then one of us can look it up while the other works on the parts, and we won't forget anything important! I've practically never done this before, only seen a video."

"Sure. There's a warning about the power supply behind the casing," I read aloud. "So first thing, turn off the power! It says so right there."

"Fuse switched off, clear. The housing is done," reports Joshua. "We still need the hydraulic jack to lift the rotor," he says, and drives a large rolling tool up to the rotor.

It only takes a few minutes to replace the defective ball bearing with the new one. Lowering the rotor also proceeds quickly, and we close the casing again.

"What's missing now?" I ask Joshua, who's wiping his hands clean with a cotton cloth.

"What do you mean? What's missing?" he asks.

"Well, the power's still off. You know better than anyone which fuse you pulled earlier," I chuckle.

Joshua trudges to the control cabinet and tinkers around there for a bit.

"Anything else, Professor?" he says, laughing.

"No, everything's fine!" I wink at him.

"That was good work, and you obviously had fun too," says Knut, who has clearly been standing behind us for a while, watching us. "I'm looking for a specific wrench.

Have you perhaps used it?"

"What exactly are you looking for?" I ask Knut, somewhat puzzled. "Tell me, did you all have to learn how to sneak around here? You always appear out of nowhere..."

“A HexStix 25,” Knut replies, laughing heartily. “No, no, don’t worry, that’s not intentional. You’re still new, and that’s why you can’t yet distinguish the sounds of the ship from those of your colleagues. We all had that problem at the beginning. But it goes away after a few days.”

“I can confirm that,” Joshua tells me. “I noticed Knut a while ago… this one? It says HS25 on it!” he then says to Knut.

“That’s exactly the one I’m looking for. Thanks!”

Knut grabs the screwdriver and disappears again. We pack everything into the rolling container and cross the deck once more towards the workshop. The sun has noticeably moved while we've been working. The clock confirms that what felt like a few minutes had actually lasted almost an hour and a half. Joshua gives me a bottle of water and we sit down at the break table. The ship's vibration is clearly perceptible through the wooden seat of the workshop chair, yet simultaneously calming. Through the small, round window behind Joshua, I see the glittering surface of the water stretching to the horizon. Something is bothering me.

“What exactly did you mean earlier at work when you said that not everyone is so friendly?” I ask into the room, without looking directly at Joshua. I know the topic makes him uncomfortable, and I don’t want to intrude, but his statement really struck me as odd.

“You remembered that, didn’t you?” Joshua murmurs, sitting up a little straighter in his chair.

“Can you tell me about it, please? I’m curious because it’s my first time traveling, and I’d like to know what to expect out there.”

“Only good things, I’m sure…” Joshua tries to reassure me, but I can see that his smile isn’t genuine.

“I don’t buy that,” I protest. “I can tell you don’t want to talk about it, and that only makes me more determined to ask you… Please tell me, it can’t be that bad, can it?”

“Man, what did I say to make you interpret it that way? I just meant that not all that glitters is gold. An old saying that should be common knowledge in the area where

you've lived… there's theory and practice, younger and older people, different ideas about how life should be lived, and some of these somewhat different ideas have survived the last forty years, do you understand now?"

"Honestly? No, I understand even less than before. What are you even talking about?" I stare at him, wide-eyed.

"Mika, how old are you?" Joshua asks, ignoring my question.

"I turned eighteen a few months ago. What does that have to do with anything? How old are you, not much older, are you?"

"I'll be twenty-eight in a month, and I've been at sea ever since I was eighteen. I was born in Algeria and have already sailed around the world twice. I'm not as ancient as Horst, but I've seen a lot. Believe me, there are still things in this world you don't want to know, precisely because you're so young and inexperienced. Perhaps you should wait until you encounter them firsthand and then draw your own conclusions."

Joshua's voice sounds very serious and not at all preachy. But that doesn't help me much right now, because my curiosity has already grown so much that I definitely can't leave him alone.

"Tell me," I begin cautiously, "you must realize that you're only provoking me by talking about it so cryptically. Now don't make such a big philosophical deal out of it and please at least give me one example of what you mean, so that I can get an idea of what it's actually about," I say, trying to lend my words the necessary weight with a very serious look.

Joshua looks me straight in the eyes, for the first time since we met. He seems to be weighing up whether or not he should actually open up to me about his thoughts. *›This is a bit awkward now…‹* I think to myself, before he starts talking anyway.

"Look, Mika, I really don't want to influence you. You'll gain your own experiences in time and learn from them. The only important thing I can tell you is that it would be dangerous to assume that all people, everywhere in the world, are capable of living according to exactly the same values as people where you come from."

His gaze is intensely fixed on me, and I sense that it would make no sense to insist on it any further.

"Okay, that's fine," I finally say. "I guess I'll have to wait a little longer."

Joshua suddenly seems relieved. He stands up without taking his eyes off me and goes to the beverage dispenser in the corner of the room.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asks in a deliberately normal voice.

I'm a little annoyed. So I just nod briefly and let my gaze drift back out the window. The tension between us isn't gone, but it's just taken on a different quality. We've grown closer in a way I wouldn't have thought possible. Joshua hands me a bottle of lemonade and stops in front of me. I look at him again.

"What is it?"

"Please don't be mad at me," I hear him say. "It's not that I want to keep it a secret. But experiences like this are very personal, and I don't know you well enough yet... maybe another time, okay?"

He smiles at me shyly, and I smile back, also shyly, although I don't really know why I should be shy. *›Cringey?‹*

"No problem, man. Like I said, it's okay. I understand you have your reasons. I'm not exactly thrilled about it, but whatever, it's not the end of the world, right?"

"Thanks," Joshua says. "I have something to take care of now. I'm guessing you can call it a day to settle in and get organized. Have fun," he adds quickly from the doorway before disappearing.

I'm sitting alone in the workshop now and don't feel like going into my cabin and unpacking my things. Not that there's much to unpack. But I need some time to think about what just happened. Reflexively, I pull my communicator out of my pocket. There's bound to be something in Ethan's notebooks that relates to what Joshua brought up. I'm feeling restless and unbalanced after the conversation that just ended. I need an explanation, something that can give me a clearer picture. Searching for »values« and »violence« is the first thing that comes to mind. The archive spits out several entries.

> *February 19, 2033*
>
> *I spoke with Volker again. He seems like a sensible and very thoughtful man. We then went door to door, all along the street and even a few streets away, to find more people who wanted to form a community-supported agriculture group with us. Volker also said that if things continue like this, everyone will be doomed on their own.*

Our search was successful: We found some neighbors who were also members of a community-supported agriculture group in the past. We want to meet and discuss how we can organize ourselves for the spring. We have our gardens and could cooperate well with each other so that we can all make ends meet reasonably well.

Arthur also thinks it's a very good idea. He has no experience in agriculture, but he'd be happy to help with the organization and would like to lend a hand. I suspect that a challenging activity would do him a lot of good.

I sincerely hope that everything will work out. I fear that this situation will last much longer than we would like, and even though I've long understood that this catastrophe also holds immense potential for change, it will be of no use to us if we don't survive this transition period…

Noram went into town without telling us. He brought back a pack of laundry detergent, cigarettes, AAA batteries, dental floss, and, surprisingly, three packs of spelt pasta and a bottle of sunflower oil. All useful, but not much to eat. He was almost grabbed by a group of very unfriendly men who clearly consider the neighborhood their territory and only escaped by running away. He said that there was hardly any police presence in the city, and when there was, they were only in armored vehicles and full combat gear. There were also armored vehicles and armed security guards in front of the towers in the financial district. They apparently insist on a no-man's-land strip at least 50 meters wide around the buildings… and they won't let anyone get any closer, even at gunpoint.

Noram made good progress on many streets that seemed deserted. However, at the intersections near the villa districts, there were numerous barricades and checkpoints. These areas appeared to have been completely sealed off. The streets were littered with burned-out car wrecks. Smoke was rising from some upper-story windows, suggesting people had set up campfires. There were also armed security guards in front of some supermarkets, but no one seemed to be

going in or out.

Noram suspects they were seized by local groups. He also saw a helicopter that appeared to be flying over the airport. Otherwise, there was little to report. Rumors about government distribution points, which Noram had also been looking for, proved unfounded, at least in the neighborhoods Noram visited.

From our regular conversations with local residents, it's becoming increasingly clear that supply chains have broken down and food supplies have completely collapsed in all major cities and metropolitan areas. This likely means that industrial food production has also come to a standstill. Stored food supplies are dwindling, and black markets have sprung up. Apparently, there are daily clashes over food and its redistribution. As a result, many people are fleeing the cities for the countryside.

This means that parallel attempts to grow vegetables and grain on every green patch of earth may have to be defended against strangers and looters, possibly with armed force…

It's not a pleasant prospect, but, in my perception, quite realistic.

August 13, 2033

Our garden looks good, but we can't really harvest much. The canned goods will soon be completely gone. They've lasted long enough. We're eating so sparingly that Adina is already having fainting spells, and so is Arthur. He moves only slowly and very cautiously. Noram and I are doing a little better, apparently, but I'm really just pretending… I've developed chronic hunger. I never thought I'd actually experience this feeling… when I think about how many millions of people experienced exactly this every day, while I couldn't even imagine it, I become painfully aware of my, our Western, arrogance and hubris.

We are still better off than many people today, even here in Germany. The neighborhood community is well-organized. We have several allotments behind our houses and have even planted more

potatoes and pumpkins on a small field next to the highway. We've hidden everything behind tall bushes and try to go there and back unnoticed. Many in the community are worried that we'll lose the harvest to thieves and robbers.

The situation in the city is very serious. There are piles of garbage everywhere, and the stench is almost unbearable in this heat. I've even seen rats on the streets. Stray dogs and cats, on the other hand, are a rare sight. I don't want to imagine why... there are rumors of a cholera outbreak.

At the entrance to the town hall, a notice stated that all citizens were obligated to bury their dead promptly and without being prompted. The notice also listed locations outside of traditional cemeteries that had been officially designated and signposted for this purpose.

Noram happened to be passing by a place where food was being distributed from a truck. A company of armed soldiers guarded the truck, and several security guards were also trying to keep the crowd calm and ensure the distribution proceeded smoothly and efficiently. Noram joined the queue but had to leave empty-handed after two hours. The flour and rice—one kilogram each per person—ran out just before he could get anything. He was particularly struck, however, by the calm with which everything was taking place. He remarked that the people had very serious, blank expressions. Almost no one spoke. Only a few whispered. The soldiers wore full combat gear and masks, so their faces were not recognizable.

Yesterday, Volker and I went to the surrounding countryside to visit the farms of our former community-supported agriculture group. They're still connected with us. At one farm, part of the barn had burned down. The family had lost the father in the fire. He had confronted the looters who were trying to steal food supplies. They simply stabbed him and left him there. His wife and young daughter hid in the cellar and waited until everyone was gone. The fire was apparently an accident because the wife dropped her oil lamp in the barn in shock when she saw her husband lying there. He was apparently

still breathing, and she wanted to tend to him. But the fire broke out, and she tried to drag her husband out of the burning barn. Some neighbors came and helped put it out. The man had already passed away... Luckily, the robbers didn't find all the supplies... This time, we left without taking or trading anything.

These two entries were probably about the beginnings of the Transformation, as Ethan describes it. Those were hard times, times I can hardly imagine now. There was obviously a shortage of everything. But people had to survive somehow. Extreme reactions could certainly be justified by that. Theoretically, it's all understandable, but deep down, I don't feel anything about it. I can't really put myself in those people's shoes. I've never been in such a situation myself. *›I've never had to go hungry...‹* flashes before my mind's eye, so intensely that it takes my breath away. My heart is pounding as if it wants to burst out of my chest. I try to breathe deeply in and out. I'm feeling dizzy. I need air. *›A panic attack...?‹* I'm not used to this. After all, they're just words on the communicator screen. I'm not in any danger. *›Why am I so upset?‹* I ask myself, stumbling to the nearest porthole. The sea air feels good. My knees are a little shaky. Something has shifted inside me, and I think I can now understand what Joshua meant. Not in his words, but in his demeanor.

I sit back down on the high stool at the workbench and continue reading.

July 12, 2044

We are all still shocked that something like this could even happen in our area. I really thought that at least in the immediate region, all the old violent structures like armies, paramilitaries, and bandits would have been almost completely disbanded. Yes, the most important word here seems to be »almost«. The criminal underworlds have lost more and more of their members, as these individuals are increasingly trying to integrate into communities. But obviously, not all of them!

We weren't prepared for it. Or rather, we couldn't imagine it happening anymore, and then it did: we were actually attacked by a group of armed wanderers. They really tried, for whatever reason, to take our community hostage.

We were really lucky that Frank and Valentin noticed the break-in in time last night. That allowed us all to get to safety and barricade the other windows and doors before our guys, threatening the three men with firearms (which we don't actually have), detained them in the dining room. I can't help but chuckle now, but at the time it wasn't funny at all. These men had pistols and machetes and weren't exactly thrilled when they realized their plan against us had backfired.

They were in our dining room for three hours and, as we could tell, they were happy to have found something to eat. After we watched them through a crack, Adina said they didn't seem violent at all and wanted to talk to them, offering them a place to stay if they wanted. But they wouldn't talk to us. One of them just screamed that he'd kill us if we came in. We didn't really know how to handle the situation. After they'd wrapped all the food they could find in a tablecloth, they simply walked out the door and disappeared into the night.

I'm desperately wondering what was wrong with these men, what they were looking for, what they actually wanted from us, and above all, why they absolutely refused to talk to us. They were obviously hungry, but where were they going and why wouldn't they listen to our offer?

We are currently witnessing the end of a very difficult time for everyone. Interpersonal relationships have improved considerably, and the previously pervasive propensity for violence has greatly diminished. There are very few known enclaves left that still cling to the old way of life. And yet, there are still those who apparently cannot do otherwise… I feel deeply for them, because they are surely only doing this to survive, and I am afraid of them, as they could hurt us all very badly…

The communities are open to everyone in principle, and no one is categorically rejected. In cases of violent individuals, each community attempts to address the situation using the means at its disposal, just as we have done with those who are strangers to us. However, this also applies to people who have already become members of a

community and continue to exhibit violent behavior. In such cases, the options range from simple offers of conversation to expulsion from the community if there is no lasting change in behavior.

Many forums on this topic have now formed within the MultiNet network, and there are already people who have taken on the role of mentors in addressing this issue. Due to their own spiritual development, they can approach these violent individuals on a different level of consciousness and potentially exert influence. Some of these mentors are also willing to travel to the affected communities and seek contact with these violent individuals.

What saddens me most is that Adina and I had also volunteered to be mentors. But in this situation, there was no way to communicate with these people.

My heart has calmed down and I feel somewhat more composed. The last entry is clearly from the end of the intense phase of the Transformation. It's interesting to read how my great-grandfather reflected on it back then, when people were directly confronted with the situation and were searching for sustainable solutions. From this perspective, Joshua's words appear in a completely different light. He probably wants to tell me that people who want to live at the expense of others and would be prepared to enforce this with violence are still conceivable today. That this is an ongoing process in which there can always be such individuals who must be dealt with with appropriate care and consideration.

It's as if a veil has just been lifted. I take another breath, this time much easier than before. I've never been confronted with the topic of »trust« in this way before. Where would I have been? This is my first time away from home. At home, we all trust each other, and I assumed that this would be perfectly normal everywhere and with everyone. But Joshua's words make it clear to me that this isn't always the case. *›What did he say? »I don't know you well enough yet«? ... He's right.‹* We barely know each other, and I expect him to reveal his inner self to me. An inner self shaped by experiences that were clearly not all pleasant. *›Phew...‹*

I stand up. My mind suddenly feels blank. I walk calmly to my cabin, but feel like I'm on autopilot. My hands unpack my things and I watch myself making the cabin feel a little more at home. *›It looks like it's going to be a long journey...‹*

Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer - Tanger

Stopover in Tangier

"The »Colombo« will arrive in Tangier early this evening to take on more cargo and two passengers. We'll also be replenishing our food supplies," Leandra announces over the loudspeaker system. "We need two people to help with mooring in the harbor. And at least four of us should pitch in and actively support the loading process. We'll be staying in port overnight and won't set sail again until tomorrow morning."

I sign up in the ship's system as a potential packing helper. I'm looking forward to going ashore again. *›At least the weather is cooperating after the last few stormy days. I should call home from shore; I haven't had a chance for a week,‹* I mentally remind myself.

Knut appears in the workshop doorway and takes a short breath.

"I think we've stowed the last crate now, and Leandra should be satisfied," he says with a broad grin.

"Are you going ashore tonight?" I ask him. "I can't even imagine what real solid ground feels like under my feet anymore."

"Yes, of course, Mika, you shouldn't miss a shore leave. We don't get the chance that often," Knut replies. "I saw you volunteered to help with packing. You don't miss a single task, either, as I've observed these past few days."

"You know, I'd rather pitch in than get bored. That's what I learned back home. But what I'm most looking forward to today is hearing my family's voices again. And I hope my communicator doesn't give me any trouble."

“Oh, it’ll all work out in Tangier. Everything will be fine,” Knut assures me. “But the radio connection, our only means of communication these last few days at sea, isn’t suitable for more than a few simple pieces of information,” he explains.

“Yes, I figured as much. It would have been far too little for me to just send a text message after so long,” I agree thoughtfully.

“They’re probably wondering how you are, aren’t they? And you certainly have a lot to tell them…” Knut smiles at me. He grabs his duffel bag, which is lying next to the door, and hurries down the footbridge.

“Hey, where are you going?” I ask. “Could you take me with you, please? I’ve never been to Tangier before…” I mutter after him, but to no avail.

He’s already ashore and strides quickly towards the city center. *›He obviously has a plan for his shore leave... I need one of those too...‹* I shoulder my backpack and slowly walk down from the deck. The air is hot, and there's not a speck of shade in sight. The whitewashed buildings are so brightly lit that I wish I had sunglasses. The stone pier where we docked stretches all the way to the harbor master's office. I see an information terminal next to it. I head over there and realize that walking on solid ground isn't the same as it was before I boarded the ship. *›I think I'm getting seasick, or something...‹*

My communicator has been trying to connect to the local network for almost five minutes now, unfortunately without any success. I know from the user manual that there can be some configuration differences that can only be addressed and resolved on-site. In the information area of the port terminal, I finally find the settings options for the local network. It's not a huge difference, but it's still significant. The communicator rings briefly as the automatic synchronization with the network begins.

›Finding some shade and relaxing is the order of the day.‹ Next to the information point is a food dispenser station with water tap, where I refill my already empty bottle. A few steps further on, on a small terrace by the roadside, some faded parasols offer shade. I sit down at one of the tables. However, something isn't right about this place. I'm the only one on the street.

The synchronization process is complete. I can now connect to the network. My mother's communicator immediately connects me to voicemail.

„"Hello Mom," I murmur into the answering machine. "I'm currently in Tangier and can be reached until tomorrow morning. Please give my regards to everyone."

Next up is Lares. He'd already tried to reach me a few days ago. The connection works this time.

"Lares, it's good that at least you're reachable!" I'm happy to see his face. "I just tried to reach Leyla. No luck."

"Yeah, it's not surprising, Simon and Leyla went to see Grandpa, he's not doing

very well." Lares' voice sounds sad. "I was at Noram's the day before yesterday. I don't think he's really aware of anything anymore. He didn't recognize me, even after I talked to him for several minutes, and quickly fell back asleep. I really don't know how much longer he can keep going like this..."

I feel my heart aching in my chest, and an indefinable fear slowly takes hold. It suddenly dawns on me that it's quite possible I'll never see Grandpa alive again. But I'm the big brother. I try to approach the situation calmly.

“If I remember Grandpa correctly,” I say, my voice a little shaky, “he was always keen to end his life painlessly. I hope that his wish will be granted.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. Mom and Dad have it under control…” Lares tries to reassure me.

›Lares tries to calm me down... well, that's something new... apparently I'm not such a big brother anymore...‹

"Where are you these days?" he asks, his face showing that he's eager to get somewhere.

"We landed in Tangier today, and I'm back on solid ground. It feels kind of strange," I reply briefly. "You know, I can't shake the thought. What do you think, will Grandpa die soon? I'm really afraid I won't see him again..."

“I can’t answer that, bro. But Dad has a better overview. He talks to the doctors a lot. As soon as they’re back, I’ll ask them to get in touch with you immediately,” Lares assures me.

“Yes, please do. I feel so helpless being so far from home,” I confess. “Tell me, what do you do all day?” I try to distract myself from Grandpa’s situation.

“I’m very busy on campus at the moment. The new school year has started, and we’re getting our bearings with the new subjects. It was probably the same for you, wasn’t it?” he asks, a little out of breath, and I can see that he’s obviously on the go.

“Yes, little brother, it was the same in my day. But where are you running off to, with your tongue hanging out?” I ask curiously.

"I'm still trying to reach InterMod on campus," he groans into the communicator. "I'll say goodbye and see you soon."

"Okay. Lares, talk to you later," I say, but Lares is already gone.

I look at the already black screen and wonder if I should call Ajola now. I'm not

entirely comfortable with the idea. It's been a while since we last spoke, and I remember quite clearly that we didn't part on good terms. *›I wonder how she's doing now?‹*

I take another good swig of water. The half-liter bottle is already half empty. The umbrella casts a good shade, but my T-shirt is soaked through with sweat on the back, and there's not a breath of wind. The pier and the sea are vaguely visible at the end of the street, but otherwise, there are only whitewashed houses. The road leads towards the center of the settlement and opens into a tiny square, which I can only vaguely make out from here. I should go and explore the area, but somehow I don't have the energy. It's almost noon, and the communicator says it's about 40 degrees Celsius in the shade. That's exactly how it feels. I'm not used to this kind of heat; it's really draining me. On the other hand, it also makes me relatively calm and relaxed. I'm no longer surprised that I'm the only one lingering on the street in this heat. *›I should really go inside somewhere, take a leaf out of the book of these people and not be out in the blazing sun...‹* something thinks to itself between my overheated neurons, but it remains stuck there, in between.

"I didn't know you were suicidal..." I hear a voice behind me. "Wouldn't you rather come inside, Mika? It's much more comfortable in here."

I look around and see no one. Only after a few seconds do I realize that the voice, which I now recognize as Knut's, is coming from my communicator, which I've placed on the table. *›When the hell did I put this thing on the table? I must be going crazy here...‹*

“Yes,” I say quickly, fighting back the fear that Knut will suddenly disappear again and I won’t be able to find him.

“Well, come on then. From where you are, go right, towards the center of the settlement, and then about two hundred meters further. On the left-hand side, you’ll see a red door with yellow markings in the wall. It’s the only door in the wall; you can’t miss it. Just knock when you get there.”

The connection drops before I can reply. I stand up, feeling really unwell. The bottle is empty too. *›Well, then, to the right...‹* The first few steps are a bit awkward, but I'm slowly getting back on my feet. After a few minutes, I can already see the door I'd been told about and wonder why there's only this one door on the street. Otherwise, it's just surrounded by rather high walls on both sides. A narrow, white alley between

two high walls. No window, nothing. *›Hmm...?‹*

After my knock, nothing happens at first. I'm trying to call Knut when the door opens with a terrible creaking sound. In the shadow of the doorframe stands a figure dressed entirely in black, staring at me with wide eyes, without saying a word.

"Um, Knut...?" I manage to stammer after a few seconds.

"Knut? Hmm..." the black figure replies, opening the door fully so I can pass through, but doesn't budge an inch.

I stand there uncertainly, unsure what to do. Then I hear Knut's voice again, this time coming from inside the house.

“Mika? Is that you? Come in, Aisha won’t hurt you…” I hear him laugh heartily. “She only speaks Arabic and doesn’t have a communicator,” he adds, as I identify the dark figure as a rather young woman as I walk past her. “She’s our hostess here,” I hear Knut say. He comes toward me in the dark corridor. “We have our traditional house here, too. Here, like everywhere we go ashore. Here we can escape the heat and get something to drink and eat,” he explains.

I feel quite unsteady in the darkness of the shadowy corridor and am grateful when I realize that Knut has simply taken my hand without another word. I follow him into a room full of people, some of whom belong to the »Colombo« crew. Many faces, however, are unfamiliar. My eyes slowly adjust to the dim light that filter through the barred skylights, seeming to trickle down from the ceiling like a white veil. The room looks like something out of an old tale about the Orient. The walls are hung with carpets, and there are sofas and cushions everywhere, on which people seem to be sitting very comfortably.

The atmosphere is relaxed, and the many voices are surprisingly quiet and hushed. The conversation pauses for a moment as I enter the room behind Knut. Eyes scan me from head to toe, and for a few seconds, a quiet silence reigns. On the tables are cups, glasses, and mugs filled with drinks that smell of aromas largely unfamiliar to me. There are also baskets and platters of exotic fruits that I recognize from pictures in botany books, but which I've never touched, let alone eaten, back home.

“Sit down here with us,” Knut invites me, and I sit down on the corner of a sofa, next to three other colleagues from the »Colombo«.

As if guided by a secret signal, the conversation resumes just as relaxed as before

my arrival. That reassures me somewhat. The silence has been a little eerie.

"What exactly is this?" I ask the group in a low voice.

"As I said, this is one of our traditional houses, the one in Tangier," Knut replies.

"Yes, of course. But what exactly is a traditional house? I'm not familiar with that term..."

"You're still very young," remarks the man to my left, a short, stocky, bald man who seems about the same age as Knut. I hadn't seen him on the »Colombo« before. "I'm Alfredo," he introduces himself. "I take care of the mechanics of the Savonius rotors on our ship. I heard from Joshua that you've already had some experience with the »Colombo's« inner workings?" the bald man says to me, looking at me as if he already knows about me.

“That’s right, Joshua has already shown me quite a bit inside the »Colombo«. Very interesting work. So, are you the head mechanic? Or how am I supposed to understand that?” I ask somewhat provocatively, as I don’t quite like his tone.

“No, not head,” Alfredo replies with a grin. “Let’s just say I probably have the most experience with it, and that’s why I’m often disturbed from my well-deserved peace and quiet with insane questions, especially by you young whippersnappers…” he explains with feigned seriousness, grinning at everyone around him.

As planned, everyone at the table starts laughing and looks at me with amusement. Knut puts his hand on my shoulder and whispers in my ear:

"Alfredo is indeed the chief mechanic on the »Colombo«. That means he's the third man in the ship's hierarchy, after Leandra and Thomé, the first officer on board. And Alfredo has spent almost his entire life on this ship. Rumor has it he was even present at the launch..."

›Now it's official, I've managed to make friends on the »Colombo«!‹ I feel ashamed and look for a way to disappear into the ground without causing too much of a stir.

“But you asked about the traditional house, didn’t you?” I hear Alfredo’s voice again and am surprised to find no trace of animosity.

“Um, yes, that’s what I actually wanted to know… if that’s possible…” I stammer something quickly.

“Well, as I said,” Alfredo begins, “you, and many others here, are still very young, but there used to be places like this, too, and they were called restaurants, or pubs,

or taverns. Sailors would settle down there when they went ashore and could buy food and drink and…" looking meaningfully around the room, "many other things. Thankfully, times have changed. Today, sailors are provided for even without money, by the local communities that use the transport ships all over the world. We do our work on one of these transport ships and are looked after here by friends who get everything they need from our ship. And in turn, they can ship the things that others elsewhere need. It's different from before, because there's nothing to buy anymore, and yet very similar, because we…" and here he looks meaningfully around the room again, "…We have friends here who make sure we get whatever we need. And that's very good, after such a long time away from home," he concludes his speech emphatically.

My face probably reflects my utter incomprehension. Because after a few moments of everyone staring at me, mesmerized, the ensuing laughter is so intense that I start to feel uncomfortable. I really don't know what the old man is even talking about, why everyone finds it so funny, and it seems I'm the only one who doesn't understand.

"Hey Mika," Knut says, placing his hand reassuringly on my shoulder again. "Don't worry about it. You can satisfy your curiosity with a targeted search for the keywords »money«, »seafarer«, and »sex« in your communicator," he instructs me kindly. "How's it going? Thirsty and hungry? I can highly recommend the local cuisine."

"Yes, exactly, but watch out for the spiciness!" the man next to Alfredo tells me. "Our unaccustomed stomachs can't handle everything. And please make sure you leave some food on your plate, otherwise you'll get twice as much. The custom here is that someone who finishes their plate must still be hungry. But people here don't have much. We're careful to eat our meals sensibly and not overstay our welcome."

The young woman who had let me in serves me a variety of dishes on a wooden platter. A young man, also dressed in black, brings me a tray with a pot of black tea. I thank them both and, while curiously listening to the quiet conversations of my table companions, I devoure the delicacies with great enjoyment.

"Well, you must have enjoyed that!", says Alfredo in a slightly friendlier tone when he sees that I have eaten almost everything.

He gets up and disappears with two other colleagues from the »Colombo« behind a door at the end of the long corridor.

"What are they doing now? Where have they gone?" I ask curiously, looking at

Knut.

"Have you already entered my search recommendation into your communicator? I don't think so..." he grins broadly at me. "...Otherwise you wouldn't be asking now."

The entry in MultiNet for »money«, »seafarer«, and »sex« leads me to two further entries:

> *Prostitution versus consensual erotic relationships. As money increasingly lost its importance, prostitution also lost its foundation, since money no longer held power over people and they were no longer forced to sell their sexuality to survive. Once established communities were able to provide for their members, the essential, culturally shaped question remained: How should sexuality be practiced? In many communities in the Northern Hemisphere, the model of consensual erotic relationships has become established. This implies that all genders and their needs are equally included. In other cultures, different priorities have emerged. Particularly in formerly predominantly Islamic regions, the questions of freedom and consent have not been answered by a majority. Here, strongly differing regional views have taken root. When visiting these regions, travelers should approach local customs with sensitivity and consideration.*

And in Ethan's notebooks I find…

> *September 5, 2017*
>
> *The Prostitutes Protection Act has just come into force in Germany. Now all prostitutes have to carry around a small, fold-out ID card, the so-called »whore's pass«, »for protection«. I'm not entirely clear on who is supposed to be »protected« from whom.*
>
> *But the legislature, which unfortunately isn't the people, has long since realized that this is pointless! That prostitution is nothing more than violence against people... and its recognition as a profession? What's the point of that nonsense? These people find it extremely difficult to escape the vicious cycle of drugs, violence, money, and sex, and the supply for this milieu simply arrives »abducted and enslaved« undetected from abroad – without professional qualifications, without protection... Thus, predominantly women continue to be turned into affordable commodities! And a »whore's pass" ultimately only confirms the social discrimination that those who are always economically disadvantaged are subjected to, because that's how it's systemically designed from the outset.*

I find it quite telling that the G20 summit took place in Hamburg, near St. Pauli... and that the reactions of the powerful and the police were so harsh this year.

Should everyone now be happy that »marriage for all« will finally be possible in this country? Does that change the fact that people still have to sell themselves for a living?

›Where have I ended up?‹ I don't quite understand what this is all about. Ethan's post doesn't answer the question I asked Knut. He's still grinning at me like a know-it-all. I have a vague idea, but I realize I don't want to delve into the topic right now.

Anyway. I need to try talking to my parents again. I find something to drink and follow the hallway and the light to a small courtyard. The sun is still very bright and the air is as hot as before, but the square room, although not covered, is mostly in the shade. I find a bench under a small palm tree and sit down. The young man from the common room is sitting on the bench opposite, in the sun, busy with his communicator. My communicator indicates that it has no signal.

“Hello,” I call to the boy. “I can’t get a signal here…”

“Hi, yeah, come over here, it works better,” he replies. “By the way, I’m Tarek,” he adds as I approach.

“I’m Mika, thanks for the tip,” I say, sitting down next to him on the bench. “Yeah, it works here. I wanted to use my shore leave to talk to family and friends.”

“Lots of people do that when they come here from their ships,” the young man grins. “Then don’t let me bother you,” he says, and starts to get up.

Judging by his words, the young man is not a sailor, but lives here in the port community.

“One more question, Tarek,” I pause him briefly. “May I ask you something, please? I don’t quite understand how your traditional house works. If I’m interpreting your words correctly, you live here in the port. What’s life like here?”

“Yes, that’s right. I live here, in the port community, and, as you correctly guessed, I also look after the local seamen’s traditional house. Strictly speaking, all the traditional houses, all the ports, and all the ships on a sea route form one huge community that constantly collaborates,” he replies. “The traditional houses and the ports also form a permanent community that, like others, is self-sufficient and is

supported by the surrounding inland communities. »One hand washes the other«, as they used to say. Today, the proverb would be a little different. Perhaps »One hand helps another«.“

Tarek seems to be very familiar with the organization in this region, even though he doesn't seem to be much older than me.

“Ah, that's quite a complex collaboration. How is it coordinated?” I continue, curious.

“Every port has an office where logistics requests are coordinated, and this office is sometimes even located in the port's tradition house. The port community—that is, the people who live right by the port, including myself—takes care of the port office's affairs, such as loading food and other raw materials whose transport needs to be organized, as well as managing the tradition house so that the seafarers can be provided for.”

"I see. So, thanks to your efforts, I can now take the passage to Burkina Faso on the »Colombo«, right?"

"Yes, in principle. But mainly you ended up on the ship because it had space for an extra passenger. That doesn't depend on us, but on the route and the turnover of the sailors working on board. It could have been a different ship, not necessarily the »Colombo«," Tarek says, looking at me somewhat surprised. "Is this your first time traveling?" he asks after a short pause.

"Yes, exactly, it's my first time away from home," I reply, a little embarrassed.

“Ah, that probably explains why you ask such questions,” Tarek chuckles, and I notice he suddenly seems to sit up straighter. “So you’ve never been to any other parts of the world besides your own homeland?” he continues, his questioning look surprising me even more.

“No, I haven’t had the time yet. I’ve been busy with my studies,” I reply briefly, sounding somewhat wary.

“Studies, eh?” Tarek studies me, pursing his lips in a gesture I haven’t seen before. “The »Colombo« comes from southern Europe. You must have boarded there, right?” he says, standing up and taking a step toward the center of the stone courtyard. “Where are you originally from? And what motivated you to embark on this journey?” he asks again, this time looking me straight in the eye, as if observing whether I’m telling the truth.

"I was born in the heart of Europe, where Germany used to be. Why do you ask? Is that something special?" I try to answer the question.

Tarek doesn't answer at first. He stands in front of me, continuing to study me with a concentrated gaze, then he starts pacing back and forth in front of me, like an animal in a cage, as I once saw in a documentary. Suddenly he stops again and turns back to me. His voice is very quiet, and I have difficulty understanding him, despite the communicator's translation.

“Well,” he begins cautiously, “not many people from Europe come by here, and even fewer as young as you… not that I’m much older,” he says after a short pause. “I’d guess you’re maybe twenty, so about the same age as me. Only, I haven’t gone to university yet like you, and while I have traveled a lot, it’s not because I had nothing better to do, but because life here forces you to keep moving.”

“I didn’t know…” I try to say something, but Tarek’s raised finger silences me.

“Of course you didn’t know what it’s like elsewhere, because, despite electronic connectivity, not everything that constitutes real life elsewhere is accessible. So please let me answer your questions the way someone from outside your familiar world would: Not everything is the way it’s portrayed in documentaries about other regions. I’m sure this isn’t meant to be offensive, but, you know, people tend to show the good things on camera and keep quiet about the less pleasant aspects.”

“Yes, but I have something else to ask you,” I say, getting up, because I'm starting to feel uncomfortable being addressed so condescendingly by Tarek. “What exactly do you mean when you say you didn't go to university? Why not? Don't you have the same educational opportunities here as in other parts of the world, like where I come from?”

“Yes, the opportunities are there. It's just that first we have to feed ourselves, and while that's possible here, it's not as easy as elsewhere, not as easy as back home where it rains a lot and the sun is mild, you understand?”

Tarek's eyes gleam with an inner tension I can't explain. I can sense, however, that nothing he says is fabricated or a lie. He's silent now, and I feel a sense of guilt I've never experienced before. I can't say why, but it feels as if I have to justify my life to Tarek.

"You mean that the young people here don't have time to study because they have to work too much to support themselves. Is that what you're saying?"

"In a way, yes. Certainly not all of them. It depends on how you were born. I certainly haven't gotten very far with studying so far..."

"Wait a minute," I press, "what do you mean by family? Are there differences here because of that? Don't you help each other, or how am I supposed to understand that?"

Tarek smiles as if he were suffering from a toothache.

“Yes, we help each other, and we even receive help from Europe, from communities connected to us on the other side of the Mediterranean. But you're probably familiar with the rule that says a community should only receive support if it falls below the minimum self-sufficiency level of seventy percent. We've never managed to do that yet—I mean, never fallen below seventy percent. You have to understand that we are a very proud people…” he adds, his eyes radiating deep sadness. “We've been reaching and maintaining seventy percent for a long time now. The price, however, is very high. That's what I mean. I, and many other young people, don't get to enjoy studying because we have to provide for the community.”

“Yes, I understand,” I murmur, somewhat shocked. “But who are these children who can afford further education, and why?”

“If you think about it logically, it’s quite simple. They’re the ones among us who can’t do hard work, for whatever reason. They have to educate themselves for all of us and then support us with the knowledge and skills they’ve gained. Everything has a purpose, but for the rest of us, like me, it’s still not exactly a pleasant thing not to be able to study,” he concludes his explanation, and I realize he has nothing more to say for the moment.

“Yes, that makes sense…” I say quietly.

Tarek is still standing in front of me when his communicator emitts a soft ring, waking us as if from a trance. After a quick glance at the display, Tarek disappears through a narrow door at the shadowy end of the courtyard.

◊ ◊ ◊

My communicator wakes me. Tarek's explanations about the inequality between different regions of this planet stayed with me even as I fell asleep. How could humanity better compensate for these different starting points? Soil fertility can be influenced, water scarcity can be combated. Only the climate remains beyond our control. I search for »solidarity«, and the notebook archive yields an interesting entry.

April 17, 2036

I can barely write anymore. I feel weak and have great difficulty concentrating. Yesterday, another one of us died. Dirk was only five years older than Noram. Inadequate nutrition and pneumonia finally succumbed to him after a long struggle, despite our best efforts.

With him, we are now only twenty-two left…

The remaining children are doing reasonably well, but if we don't get better weather soon, things will get very tight.

Adina and Noram are holding up bravely. Especially after Arthur passed away, Noram worked even more intensely, almost obsessively, on the radio. It seems, in retrospect, that this very work helped him survive. I don't know where he gets the strength to keep searching for the necessary parts. But it was worth it when the boys found that abandoned truck. No one expected to find a relatively well-preserved radio there. Noram was able to cobble together a working one using parts from two broken ones. Respect to my son!

The radio has been in use almost every evening since then, even though it costs us a lot of energy, because we have to power the small generator with our legs. There still isn't enough sunshine for our solar panels to work. Volcanic eruptions all over the world continue to keep the skies dark. Nothing is growing outside. Only in our greenhouse, with a little artificial light, can we still grow a few types of vegetables. These are what's keeping those of us who are a bit stronger alive.

I, we all, are grateful to Noram every day. We can now communicate with other people every day, all over the world. But the most important thing is that it has made us an active part of the local network. There are an astonishing number of communities in Germany that, like us, are trying to survive... and all of them have lost many people this winter... talking to these survivors, exchanging ideas, discussing solutions to similar problems, or even just sharing stories with each other, helps us all. Knowing that we are not alone gives us the courage to persevere.

What I observe in conversations with people from other communities who talk to us via radio is that the living conditions of everyone are catastrophically bad, and more and more people are seriously thinking about the way they interact socially with each other.

Their statements make it clear that—without the hidden and overt mechanisms of blackmail—the economic rules previously considered »normal« no longer apply in the current situation. The old power structures are no longer seen as a solution, but only as an obstacle. People are now recognizing what is truly necessary for survival and what is not. Many seem to realize that genuine solidarity and practical cooperation are gaining increasing importance and that this is logically leading to the formation of new communities of solidarity.

For me personally, it is both gratifying and astonishing that humanity's role and responsibility in maintaining planetary balance and nature are becoming increasingly clear in light of the events of recent years. I must confess that this thought alone sustains and energizes me—it's like a justified hope that a path leads out of this dark valley and up into the light…

I would love to meet the people whose voices I already know from the radio. I hope I will soon be able to travel.

I'm somewhat disappointed by the text because, from my perspective, Ethan's ideas about how to organize human coexistence with the environment are still very vague. However, I can easily understand that at the time, these considerations were merely a vision that still needed to be implemented. For me, much of it is already a lived reality. Once again, I realize that the implementation begun back then is far from complete. Tarek's situation is a very good example of what problems still need to be solved today, despite all good intentions and plans, before all people can enjoy equal opportunities for development.

›We're supposed to be back on the »Colombo« at half past eight local time...‹ I remember as I get up. My guest room in the traditional house is very simple and functional. A bowl and a filled water jug on a small table help me with washing. I gather my things and leave the room. Several people from the »Colombo« are already in the hallway, and I follow them, secretly hoping for a small breakfast in the

guest room. A few people greet me with sleepy nods. I smile back politely and choose a seat next to Knut.

"Hey Knut," I greet him. "Did you sleep well?"

"Sure, Mika, and you too?" he murmurs, a piece of bread in his mouth.

"Hi Mika," Tarek greets me as well. "What would you like to drink? You'll find food at the buffet behind you."

"Hi, I'll have a coffee, thanks!" I reply, and head to the buffet, taking bread, jam, and some cheese onto a plate.

On my way to the table, my gaze meets Tarek's.

“I spent a long time thinking about what was said last night. I think I understand your situation quite well now,” I say to him as I walk by. “What do you think about me inviting you to our house?”

“Thank you, that’s a wonderful offer. So you were listening very carefully to me yesterday,” Tarek replied happily.

“You could help out in our community, and you’d still have plenty of time to study on our campus.”

“That sounds good to me, but who would do my work while I’m away?”

Tarek's eyes look at me expectantly, and I realize that I hadn't really thought thoroughly about how all of this was supposed to work.

“I would ask around in my community and neighborhoods to see if we could arrange an exchange with you and one of our people. That way, both sides would gain new knowledge through the exchange of experiences,” I suggest somewhat tentatively.

“How long could such an exchange last? Especially considering the possibility of studying?”

Tarek's face tells me that he is pleased, but his trust in such an offer still needs to be earned.

“The timeframe should be two to three years, otherwise studying won’t do you much good,” I continue. “It’s best if we stay in touch and keep each other updated on the possibilities. I’ve already agreed to your contact and saved your number. Why don’t you do the same?” I smile at him.

I enjoy my breakfast. Tarek brings me the coffee.

“Are you coming? We want to be on time for the »Colombo«,” Knut asks.

“I’ll follow right away, I have something to do…” I say, a little nervously.

Knut sets off with our group. Then suddenly Tarek is standing in front of me again, beaming at me.

"Two or three years away from here? That makes my knees weak and my heart yearn for adventure at the same time. Thanks, Mika, I didn't expect that from you! We'll stay in touch!"

"We will. I'll get in touch as soon as I have any news for you. Goodbye, Tarek," I assure him, and we hug goodbye.

I hesitantly follow the group moving towards the dock. The temperature out here is still bearable this early. There's a flurry of activity on the »Colombo«; everyone on deck is preparing for departure. I take my place on the starboard side of the bow, at one of the lines, and wait for the signal.

"Cast off!" croaks a voice from the loudspeaker.

"Next stop, I suppose, is Puerto del Rosario in the Canary Islands," I hear someone say behind me.

I gaze at the rooftops of Tangier and inwardly bid farewell to the mainland. *›Soon there will be nothing left to see of it, and we'll be far out at sea again.‹* The »Colombo« glides steadily through the water and continues on its way.

Tanger - Fuerteventura

Pirates on the High Seas

The waves are quite calm. The sun is shining, and we're making good time, as Joshua puts it. After a few days at sea, we're getting quite close to land again, near the city of Agadir. The settlement and the coastline are clearly visible on the horizon. I don't really have time to look into the distance right now, though. We're replacing a damaged floor panel on deck, and Joshua says we need to

work quickly because there's going to be a storm later. The sky isn't showing any signs of a storm, but I don't really have the experience to realistically assess the situation.

A large sail can be seen on the starboard side.

"Catamaran ahead!" blares from the loudspeaker.

"They're obviously heading straight for us! I've got a steady bearing on that boat," Joshua shouts, peering intently over the railing.

"What do you mean?" I ask, trying to see something myself without hurting myself on the edge of the floorboard.

"I mean, they're sailing straight towards us!" Joshua replies. "Did you see that big exclamation mark on the sail? I wonder what that means?"

“Exclamation mark…?” I murmur, confused, as Leandra’s voice comes through the ship’s speakers and our intercom headsets.

“We’ll have her come alongside to starboard,” Leandra says. “Alfredo and Pierre, just prepare two lines and secure them on board! Stefano, you set the footbridge!”

“Do you notice the »Colombo« slowing down too?” I ask Joshua.

“Of course, the »Colombo« has to stop if the catamaran is going to come alongside…” he says, dropping everything to go to the railing.

I go along and see that a small boat, "Aha... the catamaran...", is hauling in its sails and also losing speed. Alfredo and Pierre lower the lines. Two people on board the sailboat tie up, and their boat is now parallel to the »Colombo«. The winch squeaks slightly as Stefano lowers the footbridge. Three men and two women in long, dark robes climb up and board the »Colombo«. Two others have remained on the boat. They are all wearing head coverings of the kind I've only ever seen in documentaries. Joshua and I watch the scene unfold with rapt attention and curiosity.

"The boat's sails have been patched many times, and the boat itself probably has too," Joshua remarks.

"The people themselves aren't in much better shape. They look very battered and neglected," I voice my thoughts. "What brings them here?"

"Hey, do you see those two other boats back there? They seem to be escorting this one," Joshua says, pointing towards the boats that have taken up positions some distance away.

"Has Leandra noticed this?" I ask. "I think she should know!"

"She already has this information; look, she's seen the newcomers too."

Alfredo and Leandra glance towards the two distant boats, then turn back to the group on board and disappear with them into the ship's interior. Everything seems to have some kind of order, which, at least for now, remains hidden from me. Joshua, however, seems a little tense. We return to our work and slide the prepared steel plate into the opening in the floor. We plan to secure it with a few spot welds. Joshua programs the welding robot from the workshop to seal the patch watertight. Meanwhile, we go over to Stefano and Pierre, who are standing idly by on the starboard side.

"What are you two doing here?" Joshua asks, conspicuously casually.

"Leandra instructed us to keep an eye on those two new ships out there and report any changes to her immediately," Stefano replies without even turning to us.

"Yeah, it's totally exciting," Pierre says with a bored expression, pretending to examine the railing very carefully.

"Well, I think it's more important, isn't it?" I look at Pierre questioningly, joining in the obvious game the three comrades are playing.

"What's going on here, anyway? I find it very strange, since they just appear out of nowhere, and in a group no less..." Stefano says, his face looking rather worried.

"Have they made any demands yet..." I hear Joshua say behind me, and I turn to him in surprise.

"What do you mean, demands?"

Before Joshua can answer me, I hear Knut's voice in my ear, ordering me to the galley. Joshua looks at me and points to his earpiece:

"To the galley?"

I nod, and we both head through the next door into the interior of the »Colombo«. I've never been in the ship's galley before, but I assume it must be near the kitchen and therefore also near the mess hall, where Leandra and Alfredo are with the visitors. I have to admit that the whole situation, and especially Stefano and Joshua's reactions, have only piqued my curiosity even more.

We approach the kitchen and I see Knut in the doorway with a stack of burlap sacks in his hand. He also seems a bit nervous to me.

“I thought we were supposed to meet at the galley?” I look at Knut questioningly, and I can already feel Joshua’s elbow in my ribs as he whispers brotherly in my ear:

“The kitchen is the galley, you rascal…”

Knut wastes no time with explanations, but quickly strides down the corridor in front of us.

“Pantry…” I hear him murmur, “we’re supposed to pack supplies for these people because they’re supposedly in need…” he continues, typing the security code onto the touchscreen of the armored door that seals off the storage room.

“Why is it locked?” I ask into the room, not understanding why the door needs to be locked.

“It has to be ensured that the door doesn’t accidentally open in case of an emergency and the supplies aren’t ruined by the saltwater. We all know the security code. Except you, since you haven’t yet had the pleasure of being put to work as Horst’s kitchen helper…” Joshua smirks, looking at Knut as if he expects him to say something.

Knut, however, only shows us his back, and we can still hear him muttering. His tone of voice is not particularly friendly.

"I'm supposed to pack a third of our supplies for them... a third, as if we wouldn't need any of it anymore," he stammers, looking around the crowded room somewhat nervously. "Stop standing around, you two!" he snaps at us. "Start packing potatoes and onions into the sacks, and hurry up!" he growls, tossing us some jute sacks.

Joshua and I take the sacks and fill them. Joshua with potatoes, I with onions from the large wire mesh containers lined up along the walls. If I've learned anything in the past few weeks, it's never to contradict Knut, especially when he's nervous. We're all quietly busy for a while, Knut stacking cans on the floor, us filling the sacks, when suddenly I hear Leandra's voice in my ear.

“…I don’t understand you people, what kind of approach is this? How did you come to the conclusion that all of this should be made possible? Just to solve your problems?”

We all three look at each other, puzzled. I realize we can all hear Leandra's voice over the intercom. Knut feels his intercom headset to see if the microphone is muted and signals for us to do the same. Then he whispers:

"Not a word! Something's not right here... Leandra has never accidentally left the intercom open for the whole crew before..."

The voices in the canteen are now clearer. They are unfamiliar voices and obviously far from Leandra's microphone. They must be the visitors.

“…You must understand us…”, a man with a deep voice insists, “…We have an emergency, we really do need help quickly, otherwise we wouldn’t dare to simply approach a ship like this on the high seas…”

“Please excuse me, but I can’t really believe this whole story about the neighbors refusing emergency support…” we hear Leandra say. “I’ve been around for a while myself, and as you can imagine, I’ve traveled quite a bit. But I’ve never heard a story like this before, I mean, not since our world changed after the Great Transformation in the way we all benefit from now…”

Knut, Joshua, and I look at each other with such wide eyes that I genuinely wonder if we'll have enough room in the cramped pantry. Everything has suddenly become so unusual. I remember what Joshua said about people at the very beginning of the trip, when I first met him.

"Is that what you meant back then?" I whisper in his ear, "that people aren't so friendly everywhere?"

Knut tells me to finally be quiet. We continue to listen attentively.

“Captain,” I hear a woman’s voice say, “in our region, it’s very difficult for everyone to make ends meet. The soil is barren, there’s little water, the climate is very dry, and the Saharan winds make everything even harder. We’re used to it, just like everyone in the surrounding communities. But when everyone has so little, it’s also very difficult to get the necessary support…”

“…And unfortunately, there are quite a few of us who need food…” a man’s voice chimes in from the background.

“Yes, I understand all that, but the global community has developed common rules of solidarity that make it possible for every community in need to receive help, while respecting the shared equilibrium of all life. This includes help from communities that are farther away, not just those in the immediate vicinity… While the application of these rules is based on voluntary participation and always depends on the specific local context, meaning that each community can offer help in its own way, and yes, some can also refuse help, all communities, all people, belong to the global commu-

nity, and by now the vast majority of communities respect these rules. Even those that, for various reasons, are still somewhat reluctant to apply them. It is precisely these communities that implicitly contribute to finding solutions for almost every situation, thus ensuring that these rules are constantly being further developed…"

"…If only it were all that simple…" the deep male voice spoke again, "…Yes, we already asked for help and received assistance, but unfortunately, it wasn't enough… for two weeks now, we've had to ration everything to avoid starving…"

"You won't starve. My people are already putting together an emergency ration that will certainly last you for a few days until further help arrives. You did request further assistance, didn't you?"

"Only for a few days?" another woman's voice exclaimed indignantly. "There are 160 of us, with small children and some elderly people who need to be cared for. Surely you can give more. You're sailing to the next port and can replenish your supplies…"

"I apologize again, but we only have the food we need, and the crew also has to eat…we also have to be equipped for emergencies at sea…it won't work the way you're imagining it…"

"Why not?" we hear another, croaking male voice. "Why is it so difficult for you, with all your abundance, to help us?"

"We don't have abundance…" we hear Alfredo say, "we only have limited supplies, and we are happy to share them with you to help you. But there is a line we cannot cross, for our own safety. Surely you can understand that!"

"No, we don't understand," shouts the croaking man, "we and our children, mothers and fathers are hungry, and we have nothing to lose… if you leave, we'll be on our own again. If you don't want to, then…"

"Excuse me?" comes Leandra's confident, now angry, voice. "What's going to happen then? Are you going to rob us by force? Is that your idea of gratitude, that we support you?"

Knut suddenly holds up his hand and says.

"Leave everything here. We're going to the canteen, but discreetly, okay?"

"There are more boats outside that have arrived with visitors, there are more people who might want to get on board..." Joshua whispers as we walk along the corridor towards the canteen.

"Leandra knows about it, don't worry, the footbridge is already raised, no one else is getting in here."

“What is it? Will you please explain why you are threatening us?” we hear Leandra ask firmly.

“We are in a very difficult situation, please, Captain,” the first female voice says reassuringly, “We don’t mean to threaten you, we are just trying to make it clear that we are serious, that we really do desperately need what we are asking of you, and…”

“That’s not an answer to my question,” Leandra interrupts somewhat sharply, “we’ve already been talking about this for half an hour without anyone explaining how you even got into this situation…”

“But we told you that life isn’t easy here…” the deep male voice tries to interject. But Leandra doesn’t let up:

"Yes, life is hard sometimes, but we have rules and media that allow us to register the emergency globally, so that help and support can come from everywhere. Did you actually report that there is an emergency in your region? Yes or no? Because if yes, then you shouldn't be in need anymore, or we would even have already had relief supplies on board for you! We are informed about all aid shipments and are also involved in them. However, as captain of this supply ship, I am not aware of any emergency on the northwest coast of Africa. How can that be? Something isn't right here, and I want an explanation from you immediately."

We're now standing by the half-open canteen door, watching the scene unfold with disbelief. I've never experienced such a conflict-ridden situation before, and I suspect that's why I can feel my heart pounding so intensely. Leandra is standing in the middle of the room, her hands clasped in front of her, her joints white with tension, staring relentlessly into the eyes of the tall, slender man and the petite woman.

"I want to hear the true story. And don't think we didn't notice your other ships out there. Our crew knows everything that's happening in this room, and we're not some small catamaran, but a 30,000-ton supply ship with a crew of 20 who know all the ropes... you should keep that in mind before you spread any more lies!"

Leandra's gaze flickers briefly towards Knut, and he immediately slinks away, obviously with an order that remains completely obscure to me. *›Indeed, a close-knit group...‹* I think to myself, just before Leandra's voice rings out again.

"I'm listening. You have ten minutes to tell us everything and convince us that

you're not criminals. Because you could be, when I think about your story so far and remember how you suddenly appeared here out of nowhere..."

The room fills with an unreal, heavy silence for several long seconds. The petite woman looks at the tall, slender man with pleading eyes, sits down in the nearest chair behind her, and lowers her gaze. The man remains silent for several more long seconds, then lets out a long sigh, takes a deep breath, and speaks:

"Our tribe has a long, a very long history… our ancestors invaded Spain with the Moors, and for a very long time our warriors were known in North Africa as the bravest of all warriors. We were only able to survive here in this region because we were able to supply ourselves as traders and warriors along the entire North African coast. Civilization destroyed our livelihood, and we first had to learn to cope with the new masters of the world who came from faraway Europe. Then came the »Great Transformation«, and we were told that we were now the masters of our own region. And that from now on we would have to provide for ourselves. But if we couldn't manage that, then we would receive help."

I listen intently to the man's voice, which sounds very, very sad, and I can sense that he's also angry. But I can't understand why he's angry. *›If they were only told about it, then they probably weren't present at the global meetings back then and can't really grasp the new way of life yet?‹* Leandra and Alfredo have also sat down, and I can see that they are deeply moved on the one hand, but also dissatisfied with the length of the story being told. But they say nothing, and the man continues:

“We were not and are not a people of farmers, and not only that, but the land that is now ours and should feed us is not fertile land that simply gives us everything we need to live. Strangers have repeatedly come to us and told us and explained what this new way of life is supposed to mean and why it is justified. We have been given knowledge and provided with new technology. But that doesn't help much with the drought that prevails here. We have also been told that we could find a somewhat better place to live elsewhere. We know that very few people live on the planet anymore, and that this is what made this new way of life possible in the first place. But this is our home, where we belong, where our people have always lived and, until the Transformation, lived well… of course, we have repeatedly asked for and requested support from other communities in the area, but they don't have it any easier than we do and…” His voice falters, and it is noticeable that what he is trying to say is not easy for him to say. “…We are ashamed to constantly depend on the help of oth-

ers… we are a proud people who have never begged… we would rather die in battle than be ashamed… but I don’t think you can understand that, since you come from abundance, from regions where everything is given to you…”

His voice breaks and he puts his hand over his face, as if trying to protect himself from the shame of his words. The silence in the room is so thick I can hardly breathe. Leandra looks at the man with warm eyes, but says nothing yet. Instead, she walks over to him and places a hand on his shoulder. Not like a mother, but like a friend comforting a wounded comrade. The man lowers his hand and looks into Leandra's eyes in surprise. You can see that he is grateful for this gesture. Leandra takes a step back and turns to the petite woman.

“I fully understand the extent of the emergency. We will help you. Not in the way you imagined, but in a much more sustainable way, please believe me. What you've described clearly reveals a gap in the good intentions of our global community network. It's quite possible that no one had previously considered that such a situation could arise. Please be patient. However, it will take some time before things return to a semblance of normality. Until then, we will give you what we can, and further aid supplies will be on their way soon.”

She finishes her speech and turns towards the door, where Knut has reappeared.

“Knut, we’ll continue with the supplies, please…”, she concludes briefly, and then turns to the tall man:

"You must give us time. I promise I will do everything I can to help you. Knut will pack the promised supplies for you, and I ask you to take them and go home. Nothing more will happen here. I will initiate the remaining steps via MultiNet, and the help you need will be delivered to your home. You must trust us on this," she says, looking deeply into the man's eyes.

The tall man bows his head in agreement, turns on his heels, and leaves the room with long, confident strides. We make way so everyone can get up the corridor to the deck. We go back to the galley. The sacks are full in no time. We work in silence. Not a word is necessary. Knut directs us only with gestures. The air is thick, and I feel a lump in my throat. Several more crew members arrive and help carry the full sacks and transfer the provisions to the other boat.

“So, we’re rid of them again…”, says Joshua, watching the small boats slowly depart.

The »Colombo« is noticeably picking up speed again. I hear Leandra's voice over the intercom and onboard speakers.

"I want to thank you all; you reacted calmly and without panic in this unusual situation... I think we were able to help these people and hope that they won't surprise other ships with blitz visits in the future... I'm not entirely sure yet, but for the moment, that's all we could do. We're returning to our normal routine."

I hold onto the railing and watch the boats thoughtfully. The swell has increased somewhat. Joshua pats me on the shoulder and disappears below deck.

Actually, everyone has disappeared from the deck, as I can see. I'm alone, and that feels good after all the hustle and bustle. I sit down on a ledge at the base of the next rotor. A cloud of unfinished thoughts swirls in my head. I remember some things I read in Ethan's notes. There was even something about pirates, if I'm not mistaken. I start a new query, and the communicator reports that the archive is being searched.

I need some time to reflect on what just happened. What I just experienced leaves me with a very strange feeling. It has both surprised and deeply moved me. It's a new dimension of solidarity, which, as Ethan's notes clearly demonstrate, has been built and fostered among diverse people across the planet for many years. But what happened shows me that these efforts are far from over. The search is finished, and the list is complete. The wind is beginning to pick up. I think I'll go below deck to my cabin; I can read there in peace.

March 2, 2030

Jitu has been en route from Africa to us for a week. Noram told me that the relatively small cargo ship was attacked by pirates off the Ivory Coast and all its cargo was stolen. Some crew members were injured in the fight against the pirates, but the few passengers all seem to have escaped unharmed. I'm very relieved; it could have been much worse… Five years ago, this wouldn't have been possible in the Atlantic, as the British and Americans were everywhere with their navies. However, the situation has changed somewhat since then. While the Americans are still present, their attention is now focused more on the large Chinese freighters, and these are never attacked, as West Africans tend to have more problems with

the Americans and Europeans, the former colonial powers.

The cargo ship that was attacked was flying the Portuguese flag and had very little food on board, as it was mainly carrying coffee from Ivory Coast for the European market, Noram explained. Jitu was on board as a passenger because it was the most affordable way for him to travel. Apparently, the people of Ivory Coast are in such dire need that even the food supplies of a cargo ship are worth an attack on the high seas… it's very sad. It's good that Jitu wasn't hurt.

›Look at this...‹ Here, a similar situation to the one I just experienced is described. Around sixty years ago, violence was also used, and there were apparently some injuries. Luckily, that didn't happen today. So, things have changed since then, but not so much that such things don't happen anymore. The reasons for the attack also seem to have changed. Back then, there were supposedly robbers who were prepared to use violence for their own gain. Today, desperate people were at work, willing to exert pressure for their own survival because they saw no other way out. However, now that I think about it more closely, Ethan describes how the "robbers" were also just looking for food. That means that they, just like people today, had to use violence out of desperation for their own survival. *›Right?...‹* But there's more.

August 25, 2038

Things aren't good right now, what's happening around us, and I'm sorry that Jitu, having finally arrived, had to travel during these uncertain times. We're so happy to see him again. He tells us a lot about Koti and his travels, but we can't really give him our full attention. We've been missing Anika, Robert, and Konrad for three days now; they left for Heidelberg as a procurement group, and everyone is very worried about them.

This morning's local radio message stated that it was now clear a relatively large, well-armed group of army personnel was abducting people and forcing them to work in the fields west of Heidelberg, in the Rhine plain. We don't know if these people were also operating in the greater Heidelberg area, but there's a strong fear that our procurement group might have been abducted by them as well. I don't

want to imagine what they're going through right now... and, even worse, I wouldn't know how we could help them, because we can't fight armed men and therefore can't free anyone...

Today we had a brief visit from a community near Heppenheim. The news the man brought was even more alarming. He told us that the »Free State of the Upper Rhine« had been proclaimed west of the Rhine and that armed border posts had been set up at many access points. He advised giving the area a wide berth. It's a good thing we're not very close.

I don't long for the old state, but I do wonder what became of the Federal Republic of Germany, its politics, and its government… There are still a few radio stations broadcasting propaganda, but it seems they're run by very small groups who still yearn for the power that once existed. Right now, only the law of the jungle prevails. The political structure I remember is gone, and it doesn't seem to be what the current warlords actually want. Strictly speaking, they're a small group of armed and, above all, violence-prone individuals whose plan is to establish themselves locally and live at the expense of those who can't defend themselves. This is more like the feudal power structures of robber barons that emerged on German soil much earlier.

The fact that the climate now allows for self-sufficiency and that the newly formed peaceful communities have been able to stabilize is inciting these violent groups to commit attacks.

Networking within our communities and maintaining constant communication are essential for ensuring security in our region. It's positive that these individuals, who in my view are still misguided, have so far only directly attacked a few communities. This could also mean that, despite their weapons, they don't feel powerful enough to engage in open confrontation. This is good for all of us, but we must continue to organize ourselves even better and find ways to communicate peacefully with these potentially violent individuals.

Here I realize how much I miss making phone calls and having inter-

net access. Noram and his colleagues are still searching for ways to somehow reuse the existing landline telephone network. As I understand it, they lack both the knowledge and certain components needed to establish stable connections. But they are persistently working on it.

Until then, radio communication remains the most reliable means of communication, with all its inconveniences. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to communicate directly with these would-be rulers; that would be far too dangerous. And so we can only speculate about what might have happened to our people.

The future lies in the networking of small, local communities that cooperate through dialogue and are organized in a decentralized manner. For me, the picture is becoming increasingly clear, also due to the direct experiences we are having together. Adina believes that we need to find solutions that people can understand in order to want to join us in trust.

October 12, 2038

Noram and I have already visited all the communities we know of on the right bank of the Rhine and in the Odenwald forest between Frankfurt and Karlsruhe. It makes such a difference to finally meet and get to know the people whose voices we had only heard over the radio. I had always wanted to, but never truly imagined that such warmth and friendliness were actually so widespread. So far, there hasn't been a single community on our route that didn't welcome us with open arms and hearts. Of course, we already »knew« each other from the radio meetings, but it touched me deeply that many who hadn't attended the meetings knew us by name and received Noram and me with great respect.

It must be because of what I keep saying and explaining in the radio meetings. It obviously resonates with people. They don't ask as many questions when we're talking directly, but I can feel them looking at me. Sometimes it makes me uncomfortable because I don't

know exactly what they expect from me… Noram thinks that in this situation, they would probably receive anyone who could explain a vision well in the same way, as long as that person gave them some hope… Maybe, I don't know. What's important to me is that they listen, that I somehow reach them…

Our coordinated approach towards the feudal enclaves now seems to be bearing fruit. We've decided to isolate them as much as possible by avoiding entering their territories altogether. This should prevent our people from being abducted. Sometimes I think that our abducted members might be carrying our developments and ideas into these enclaves, thus contributing to their disintegration from within.

We received word from home that three new people, who had escaped captivity, had been taken in. They met two of our missing members, Robert and Konrad, who had told them about our way of life while they were imprisoned. This allowed them to find our community in the safest way. Unfortunately, they couldn't tell them anything about Anika. They suspect she's being used for the pleasure of those in charge. She's only eighteen, after all… Anika's situation is not good news…

Adina explained that the gangs probably aren't attacking because they have almost no ammunition left and don't know where to get more. Without functioning firearms, most of the followers no longer dare to start an open conflict. The self-evident nature of their asserted claim to power no longer resonates even within their own ranks. And in the immediate vicinity, free life is taking place in peaceful communities. Many who have spoken privately with the prisoners ask about alternatives and long for a different life than the one they are currently leading.

That's a very good thing. Then the change will progress steadily. We've already taken in one soldier. I'm sure more will follow. It's only a matter of time. We need to keep a low profile with the gangs, but seek communication with people who are open to peaceful coexistence, and be very patient.

I note with interest that, in the midst of this period of transformation, the way people interacted had already changed so drastically. There were far fewer people on Earth than before, and even fewer resources to ensure their survival. On the one hand, a few enforced their power through violence; on the other hand, a large majority was no longer willing to serve the powerful as slaves for a supposed sense of security.

I put the communicator away. My brain keeps working, but I consciously don't try wanting to understand everything anymore. While I can logically grasp some of what happened back then, I simply can't comprehend the nature of violent people. I don't know anyone who would be willing to harm another human being, let alone enslave them by force. Even just reading about what happened back then evokes a very unpleasant feeling in me today.

Fill up Water in Puerto del Rosario

We've been buffeted by strong gusts of wind for hours. It's amazing what my stomach can take. *›We'll reach Fuerteventura soon... finally some land under our feet again...‹* I'm glad we're now heading into the calmer waters of the harbor.

"Mounting under these conditions isn't easy, but here in the harbor basin we're somewhat protected from the gusts of wind," Knut remarks.

"Yes, I can feel that too; the sheltered bay makes it much more bearable," I agree.

We both stand at the railing in the bow, watching the harbor basin glide past us. The »Colombo« approaches the dock slowly and cautiously.

“Will we be staying in a communal house again here?” I ask casually.

“No, as far as I know, we’ll be sleeping on board, but we’re free to move around on land,” Knut replies. “Although I remember Puerto del Rosario not being a place to linger, simply too desolate… and hardly anyone lives here; the few who do have retreated to the fertile valleys,” he adds, turning to Leandra, who has just appeared behind us.

“We have a small food delivery and a few crates destined for the island that still need to be unloaded,” she says. “Knut, could you please take care of that?”

Knut nods to her and then turns back to me.

"Mika? Are you guys involved? Yes, I mean you and Joshua. Where is that tall guy

anyway?" he asks, looking around the deck. "He should be here, shouldn't he? Or did I mishear something in the galley earlier?"

"Yes, yes, there he is..." I hear Joshua's voice from somewhere on the starboard side, but I can't see him.

"Leandra, who's taking the things this time?" Knut asks, ignoring Joshua's answer. "Is Tami still here?"

"I think so," Leandra smiles at him. "I've already contacted her; she'll be here shortly. I'm looking forward to seeing her again, too."

The wind has died down, and the sun is beating heavy on us again. The old, partially dilapidated houses are whitewashed, but I don't see any people. Occasionally, a palm tree peeks out between the houses, but otherwise, I can hardly spot any greenery. This harbor is an unreal place. The cranes in the harbor basin look disused, as if they haven't been used for a very long time. The landscape resembles a desert more than a place where people would live. *›Can people even live here?‹* I wonder.

"There comes Tami with two guys in tow. Let's get started..." calls Knut and starts up the small crane.

Joshua and I hurry to stow everything on the pallet by the crane. There are several crates of food that obviously can't be produced here, and more crates that appear to contain spare parts for something more complex. Some parts are only covered with a thick tarpaulin, revealing mechanical tool arms and other stainless steel components underneath.

The harbor master and the two men approaching us with a self-propelled cart have already arrived at the quay. The harbor master, *›Tami?‹*, has her communicator switched on and is obviously working on something. The cart is positioned at the edge of the quay. Knut uses the crane to lift the pallet over the railing and can now lower it directly onto the loading platform of the cart below. He locks the crane again, and we follow Leandra across the footbridge to shore. *›It always feels strange when the ground isn't shaking anymore...‹* I think to myself as I set foot on the stone floor. *›But I mean, it still shakes, and then I get seasick on the mainland...‹*

The harbor master and Leandra embrace as if they've been friends for ages. Knut keeps discreetly in the background, but his gaze is fixed on the woman. *›They must have known each other for a while, but there's more to it than meets the eye...‹* I think to myself as I watch the scene unfold. Tami, the harbor master, is a bit older than

Leandra, perhaps even Knut's age, and wears faded jeans and a simple white blouse. Her curly, almost white hair is pulled back in a massive braid and covered with a dark blue captain's hat adorned with gold badges. The hat is the only thing that suggests she has anything to do with the harbor. If she weren't wearing it, I would never have associated her with one. *›Yes, yes, and I have so much experience with harbors, don't I...‹*

"It's great that you also brought the spare parts for our observatory. I just checked the delivery note against our order, and it seems everything has been delivered. That takes care of the official part," says the harbor master, then looks directly at me. "By the way, I'm Tami," she says, and following my gaze, she adds, "...And these two are György and George."

"Hello, and I'm Mika," I greet her back, somewhat surprised to find myself caught up in the proceedings.

György and George are two tall, blond men who clearly have European ancestry. They both nod at me in a friendly manner and continue securing the crates on the truck bed with quick, practiced movements.

Apparently, I'm looking at the rickety-looking vehicle with such a worried expression that George feels compelled to answer my unasked question:

"The cart may look like it could collapse under the weight, but it'll hold, don't worry..." he smiles mischievously.

"We both lovingly cherish and care for it," György adds proudly.

I could ask them if they are brothers, but the pronunciation alone, which is easily distinguishable despite the communicator, reveals that they must have come here from different regions.

“We still need to fill the water tank on the ‘Colombo’,” Leandra says to Knut and me.

“The tap is over there in that blue container, just help yourselves,” Tami tells us.

György and George quickly say goodbye and drive the cart toward the end of the quay.

“Excuse me, but I have to go somewhere…”, Knut murmurs and disappears in the direction of »Colombo«.

I watch him go, wondering if he's heard about the filling and will tell Joshua on the

»Colombo« to lower the filling hose. No sooner thought than I see Joshua's head at the railing. He's fiddling with something on deck and now lowers a thick, blue hose over the railing towards us. The hose has an aluminum-encased connector and isn't light at all, but Joshua lowers it so quickly that I manage relatively easily to pull it through the air to the container and attach it to the tap. A signal to Joshua to start filling, and I can feel the water being pumped towards the »Colombo«.

Tami and Leandra are talking in low voices a few steps away. I can't understand a word, but it seems to be a serious conversation. I suspect it must have something to do with what happened during our crossing. Suddenly, they both look in my direction.

"Mika, when you and Joshua are finished, could you please also come to the harbor master's office?" Leandra says to me and, without waiting for my answer, turns around and walks away with Tami.

The quay ends at a shunting area where trucks must have maneuvered in the past. Next to it stand several old buildings. *›That must be the harbor master's office...‹* I think, as I see the two women approaching the largest of the buildings. The flow of the water is still clearly noticeable through the hose. *›Now I understand why Knut was in such a hurry... I really need to get somewhere soon too...‹* I look up at Joshua.

"How much longer will it take to refill?" I call out to him.

"At least another half hour," I hear Joshua say.

›Okay, then it's time for a pee break,‹ I decide quickly and head straight for the footbridge and onto the »Colombo«.

◊ ◊ ◊

The connecting sleeve appears to have been welded to the water container's tap point. I can no longer detach it by hand.

“Here, take the wrench!” I hear Joshua call and turn around.

He waves a strange metal sickle, as if he is about to throw it down.

"Come upstairs and take it," he replies to my questioning look. "I'm not throwing it down. It might break, and we don't have another one. Hurry, please!" he urges me.

I get the wrench and a short time later everything is done. I tie the wrench to the hose clamp and Joshua pulls everything back up onto the »Colombo«. After a short while, he too comes down the footbridge and we walk together to the harbor master's office. The sun casts our shadows across the quay onto the walls of the old warehouses,

which look like shaky effigies of long-extinct dinosaurs. The large metal gates are rusted and hardly any of the windows still have their panes intact. The halls probably haven't been used since the time of the Great Transformation.

The quay is quite long, and it takes us a while to reach the large shunting area. On the right, I see the old handcart that György and George used to drive, parked in front of the gate of a small but new-looking warehouse. It's still loaded, but there's no sign of the two men anywhere.

The gate itself is open, and we take a quick look inside. Joshua goes first; I hesitate. I don't feel comfortable peeking into places I haven't been invited to. Joshua disappears into the shadows behind the gate, and I hear him call out:

"Hey guys, do you need help unloading?"

I also take a step through the gate. It takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. I can slowly make out Joshua again, standing a few meters in front of me. To my left and right are long rows of metal shelves, half-filled with all sorts of different things. The labels describe spare parts and components for something unfamiliar to me.

“I don’t see anyone here,” Joshua says to me and calls out again, this time louder, “Hey, guys! Anyone here?”

His voice quickly fades away in the large room, but no answer comes.

„“Come on,” I say, “let’s go to the harbor master’s office. Maybe everyone’s there. It’s probably not that urgent for them to unload and stow the things.”

“You’re right,” Joshua says, and walks past me and out into the bright light.

Now that my eyes have adjusted to the shadows, I hesitate to go back outside. There's nothing more to do in here, though. I wonder what the two men are planning to do to move the loads onto the shelves. I don't see a crane on the ceiling, nor a forklift parked around. *›Not my problem!‹* I think, and trudge back out into the light of the setting sun. I have to cover my eyes for a moment; it's so bright now.

Joshua has walked almost the entire length of the shunting area and is waving to me.

“Are you coming, or what?” I hear his voice, because I can’t really see him yet; my eyes are full of tears.

Almost without seeing where I'm going, I somehow manage to find the entrance to the harbor master's office. Joshua is already inside, and I can hear the voices of

Tami, Leandra, and, indeed, the two men as well. Blinded by the light, I can't see anything yet.

There are five doors in the small entrance hall, all open. I head left, toward the voices, and can finally understand what's being said.

"…And you're welcome to come along to the observatory, and if you want and enjoy it, you can even help with assembling the parts. We always need skilled hands…" Tami's voice rings out.

"There are always plenty of people here who want to help," says George as I come through the door. "Unfortunately, there are only a few who can actually lend a hand…" he adds, smiling, clearly amused.

Joshua, like everyone else, is already sitting around a round table, pouring himself a very fragrant coffee from a large pot. On a large plate are some sort of cookies. They all turn briefly to me and give me a friendly nod.

"My understanding of »helping out« is that nobody gets hurt! But very few of the fellow scientists who are usually here can do that," György concludes George's explanation.

Everyone is laughing heartily. I don't quite understand why it's all supposed to be so funny, but I sit down and pour myself a cup of coffee. However, something else is buzzing in my head.

"Which observatory?" I ask curiously. "I've heard something about an observatory, haven't I? And when you talk about scientists, do you mean the astronomers who study the starry sky there?"

"Yes, you heard right. We have one of the few functioning astronomical observatories in the world," Tami says confidently. "But scientists aren't only found there. There are other fields of research for which our island offers ideal conditions. For example, we have around a hundred scientists researching and working here in the field of seawater desalination. We're currently self-sufficient enough with our desalination plant to supply the entire island and the mainland with drinking water. You just filled up with our water, didn't you?"

I notice, once again, that my mouth is unconsciously open. I'm really surprised.

"I must confess that my first impression of this port didn't exactly inspire any expectations of scientific work," I reply somewhat sheepishly.

“Yes, I can well imagine. Your expression is like that of someone setting foot on this island for the first time,” Tami answers with a broad smile. “But the observatory and the opportunities for astronomical studies soon compensate the newcomers once they immerse themselves in their work here.”

“What spare parts are going to be installed?” Leandra asks. “And how long will that take?”

“If we have enough people who can work skillfully, then it should be done in two hours, before nightfall if we wanted to do it now,” George says.

"We're about to replace the rotating mechanism for the automatic mirror adjustment in the observatory. We haven't even put the spare parts away yet, so we can get started right away," György concludes.

"I'd love to join in; that sounds like a nice change of pace," I say without hesitation.

"What do you mean by 'enough people'? I'd be up for it too. Are Mika and I enough, or do we need more of us?" Joshua asks.

"Well," György murmurs, looking up, clearly considering everything that needs to be done, "it's much easier if several people move the load at once when removing and reinstalling the mechanism. The crane will support it, but there are several fixing points that need to be aligned correctly simultaneously. The more people, the faster it goes. I'd say if two or three more of you could join us, that would be perfect," he concludes, looking hopefully at Leandra.

"All right," Leandra smiles and pulls out her communicator. "Knut? Bridge? Please report in..." she says confidently into the microphone, and then briefly to the group: "I'll have Knut come down with two more people, okay?"

George and György's faces beam. George immediately stays up and leaves the room without another word. György follows him, but briefly glances over his shoulder:

"We'll take the cart to the »ferrocarril« towards the observatory already. We'll all meet there."

Joshua makes as if to get up. Tami calms him down with a clear gesture.

“I see, you shouldn’t hold people back who want to do something,” she says, “but let’s take it easy. We can wait until everyone’s here, and then we’ll go to the observatory together. George and György will need a while to get that old car up the hill,” she explains, adding, “Thank you for wanting to help us. Once the work is

finished, Hans Nüchter’s team from the observatory will offer an interesting journey into the cosmos after nightfall. You’re all warmly invited to join us.”

Tami suddenly gets up, and we follow her to the door of the small entrance hall. Knut, accompanied by two helpers and our rolling container, approaches the harbor master's office across the forecourt. They are only visible as shadows against the setting sun.

“Hi Tami, I brought along two more people who are good at lending a hand. Alfredo and Kiichi,” Knut announces. “Which way?”

“Hello!” Tami greets the newcomers, clearly pleased. “It’s great that you want to help. We’ll be taking the narrow-gauge railway together to our observatory in Tefia in ten minutes. You can put your roll container on the transport wagon. The spare parts should be there by now, too. Just follow the signs for »ferrocarril«. The stop is between the two harbor quays. See?”

Tami points towards the city with her outstretched arm, and I can just make out the little train engine between some palm trees. We set off with the rolling container.

“Look, the railway is electrified. Somehow they’ve built an overhead line system here,” Alfredo remarks in amazement.

“George and György have already loaded the old cart with the spare parts onto the low-loader wagon,” I tell the others.

“Our roll container should fit there too,” I hear Knut say behind me.

The train isn't very long. The open flatbed trailer is coupled directly to the locomotive. A closed container wagon and two passenger cars follow. All are quite small. The roll container is stowed on the flatbed trailer. Behind us, Leandra and Tami, along with about half a dozen other people from the »Colombo«, are slowly approaching the train.

"Are more people coming, or can we get going?" Knut asks as we settle into the first passenger car.

"No, we're all here. The rest of the crew are working on the »Colombo«, Leandra answers for everyone, sitting down next to me.

"I think we'll be leaving soon, since we don't need to add another passenger car," György says to Tami.

Tami exchanges a few signs with George, who is waiting in the locomotive for clear-

ance to depart, and the train slowly starts moving.

“Off to Tefia,” she says with a smile to the group.

Tefia Research Station

It's a short and bumpy ride on the narrow-gauge railway. The village of Tefia consists of small white houses nestled along the railway line. Many have small, light blue decorations on the corners and gables. Greenhouses peek out between the plots, and everything seems very lively.

"Next stop, Tefia Center," George calls out jokingly. "Please get off on the right!"

"Look, there are two more passengers... Stop for a minute, let's ask if they might want to come along," György replies.

The train comes to a stop with a mighty squeal of the brakes. Tami waves to the two waiting passengers and they board our carriage.

“Hello Hans, hello Susann,” she greets the older man and the young woman as they sit down. “As you can see, we have help repairing the mirror system, and we also have an audience in the second carriage for tonight’s astronomy show.”

“It’s good that you let me know so early,” the young woman replys. “We’ll manage to organize accommodation and dinner for everyone somehow…”

The train slowly starts moving again and leaves the small village. The little locomotive has to struggle against the ever-steeper incline up the hill. It manages, but only at a slow speed. The railway line passes an old, dilapidated windmill and ends on a high plateau. The train picks up speed again. On the plateau, a dozen wind turbines turn leisurely, and further away I can make out two domes and a large building.

“This is the observatory with the two telescopes, and next to it is our science campus with a guesthouse and cafeteria,” explains Hans, the older man who had just boarded the bus.

“With the front telescope, which uses a mirror, we can conduct our investigations in the visible spectrum of light,” Susann informs us. “The rear one is equipped for radio astronomy. There, we examine the radio wave spectrum of the observed celestial bodies.”

“Both are equipped with high-resolution camera systems, so we can archive our

observations and use them for long-term studies," Hans adds.

"How many observatories are still operating worldwide?" I ask them both.

"We are networked with about fifteen stations worldwide, so all the telescopes, whether optical or radio wave, can work together and function like one giant system. The Event Horizon Telescope was built before the Great Transformation, that is, seventy years ago, and has changed little since."

"Is the wind farm large enough to supply the entire station and campus with electricity?" I inquire.

"Not yet; we also get electricity from a tidal power plant built on the west coast, which is operated by another research group. But we are expanding the wind farm up here," Susann replies.

"End of the line!" George calls out as the train reaches an unloading platform and comes to a stop. "Please help with the unloading! Thank you!"

"Can we put our trolley on your cart?" Knut asks György. "Or will the thing collapse?"

"That's fine... and completely without any problems," George grumbles from the side.

Everyone pitches in and the low-loader is unloaded. George and György lead the way with the fully loaded old cart towards the observatory. The cart manages the small incline without complaint. *›It's obviously in good shape, even if it doesn't look like it,‹* I think to myself as I trudge behind them. I see everyone else, led by Tami and the scientists, leaving the final stop and heading towards the campus.

"When we're finished, there'll be dinner, and after nightfall, the big astronomy show by Dr. Hans Nüchter and his charming assistant," George says with a grin.

"So come on, the faster we finish here, the sooner we can clock out," György adds.

›I'm curious to see what happens...‹ I think to myself, looking forward to the evening.

Fuerteventura - Dakar

Airship crosses

The »Colombo« is now sailing along the coast of Western Sahara for the second day. *›Our next stop will probably be Dakar...‹* The weather forecast isn't promising for the near future. It's still relatively calm on deck, but I often have to hold onto the railing to keep my balance. In the distance, bizarre cloud formations are already piling up, forming and dissipating, driven by the wind and bathed in sunlight.

“Please make the »Colombo« weatherproof, we will be spending some time in stormy seas and we don’t want to run into any problems.”

I hear Leandra speaking directly to us over the intercom. *›The way she emphasizes it, it seems important to her,‹* I think to myself, and I realize I've already reflexively turned towards the nearest open bulkhead to close it. *›It really becomes second nature...‹* I chuckle.

"Can someone help me check the storage rooms?" I hear Knut ask over the intercom. "I don't want anything blowing up in there in the next few days," he adds, his voice somehow distorted by static electricity.

"I'll come and help," Joshua's voice chimes in from a distance.

"I'm on my way," I say, heading towards the storage area.

Before I go down through the hatch, I glance up at the sky again, because I still can't quite explain the crackling in the intercom. The sky is still mostly clear, and the weather front is still far off on the horizon. *›Strange that there's already so much static electricity...‹* I mutter to myself, but then I see the reason. Almost directly overhead, another large ship is cruising by, this time an airship. As if to confirm my suspicion, I get a slight shock when I grasp the handle.

“Please note that the »Orion« is currently crossing our airspace…,” Leandra announces. “…And as planned, as with every one of our voyages so far. Admittedly,

two days earlier than usual, but still within the agreed timeframe. She has a more powerful radio relay on board, which means data communication with the mainland is restored. Anyone wishing to send messages home will have the best opportunity to do so within the next thirty minutes."

›Damn! ...and I have to go down to the ships larder now...‹ I grumble and close the hatch tightly behind me. Knut's voice is already echoing in my ears:

"Okay, Mika, you'll take charge of the fresh food section over there on the left. And you, Joshua, will take charge of the canned goods. Everything else should already be secured, but double-check everywhere to make sure nothing can come loose. Please report the progress to me section by section. We don't have much time!"

"But the sky is still blue and the storm clouds are far away..." I begin, a little confused, asking what the rush is all about.

"Things can change very quickly on the high seas," Joshua whispers to me as he passes. "We're better off having everything stowed securely well in advance. Believe me, there are always surprises, and not necessarily pleasant ones..." he adds before disappearing behind the shelves.

I check one container after another and reflexively call out to Knut as I continue walking:

"Clear! ... secured! ... also clear!"

I notice that the ship is now rolling a bit more than before. *›The swell is increasing...‹* I realize, and suddenly I'm quite proud of myself for that. *›Like an old sea wolf...‹* I chuckle, almost tripping over Knut, who's doing something not yet recognizable on the floor of the next corridor.

"Slow down, kid!" he shouts in alarm as he falls over and rolls.

"I'm sorry," I stammer, "I didn't even see you..."

"Yeah, yeah, it's okay... here, help me on this side... I can't get this flap closed properly..." he pants, trying to hold the metal flap of a tool trolley charging station in place with his foot.

I help out and, as the ship rolls again, we push the tool container completely in together. The hatch is now closed. Knut stands up, his face drenched in sweat.

"Thanks, that was close..." he says, as if apologizing.

"Sure," I say, a little confused, "but how did that happen? It should have been

stowed away properly before, right?"

"It was, but I wanted to put in a forgotten wrench and got caught by the wave as I opened the hatch. The thing just rolled out..." Knut grumbles, a bit annoyed, and adds: "You see, that's exactly why everything has to be checked before a sudden change in the weather... like this!" he says. "Get everything ready here, then you might still have some time to send something via the »Orion«..." he says and disappears.

›Aha, so that's why everything has to be stored properly...‹ I smile after him. *›The »Orion« is definitely something I'd like to take a look at...‹* One more shelf and I'm done with my tour. Joshua is obviously finished too, because he's already standing in the doorway, busily typing on his communicator.

Back on deck, I'm surprised by how much the surroundings have changed. The sky is no longer blue, but gray, and the »Colombo« is now rolling more violently in the increasing swell.

"Please only stay on deck with a safety rope and life jacket!", the loudspeaker system announces in my ears.

A quick grab at the nearest locker and I'm secured with my life jacket and rope. Above us, though now a bit further away, the »Orion« is still flying on a parallel course. *›...Will she also have trouble with the wind?‹* The wind has noticeably increased and is blowing along the »Orion« flight path, which is also in our direction of travel.

I'm not very familiar with airships, but the sight of this vessel is quite an unexpected experience. It's almost as long as the »Colombo«, silver in color, and carries a large, heavily laden container platform beneath its bulky hull. Large rotors, driven by electric motors, are visible on its sides and stern. Electricity is generated across the entire surface of the ship, which is almost completely covered with flexible solar panels. *›Actually, it's almost entirely made of flexible solar panels,‹* I recall from a solar energy course I took last year. The hull must be filled with helium, my communicator tells me, and since no fuel is needed, there's no unwanted lift combined with weight loss due to fuel consumption. The roof area features a huge terrace that almost doubles the surface area and can be folded up for compact storage after landing.

“Actually, these behemoths shouldn’t be able to fly… well, physics alone,” says Alfredo, who, roped in and wearing a pink life vest, stays beside me, also staring up

at the sky. “Just like bumblebees, buses, and bricks shouldn’t be able to fly,” he laughs gruffly and incredulously.

“I guess physics turns a blind eye to the »Orion« then,” I reply with a broad grin. “I wonder what they’re transporting in those containers? At the speed they’re traveling, it can’t be perishable food?” I ask, tracing the airship’s path across the sky.

“The »Orion« flies its route from Central America over West Africa to Europe and back again,” Alfredo explains. “Mika, the food is of course packaged as canned goods. More crops grow in Central America than are consumed locally, so the surplus is preserved and distributed all over the world. But the majority of the cargo is probably technical products and raw materials like iron, silver, and gold. But why all of that has to be transported halfway around the world is beyond me,” he says to me.

“We really do recycle just about everything,” I reply. “One problem, though, is that some materials simply disappear. A lost communicator, a sunken boat. We can no longer use these raw materials.”

“And these materials are available in Central America?” Alfredo asks.

“Yes, as far as I know, there are metals and rare earths there that can be extracted from the ground as needed and can easily replace the aforementioned loss,” I say, searching through the notebook entries archive for »raw materials«.

The listed entry must date from Ethan's early years. He was in his mid-twenties at the time.

> *October 12, 2012*
>
> *I had to think a lot about Noram's future today – the little guy is only eighteen months old and developing wonderfully. Adina read me an article about the situation of children in Colombia, and Noram played happily while I listened. I was glad at that moment that Noram couldn't understand anything yet. Adina read from a travelogue by a social researcher. He had experienced a lot of sadness on his trip to Colombia. He described how poverty is everywhere outside of Medelin, in the Colombian hinterland. Children as young as five have to collect recyclables in the garbage dumps of the big cities. School? Forget it! Children's rights? Forget it!*
>
> *His bus ride to Bogota took him past such a garbage dump, and he*

could see at least 10 small people who had to work there – a truly horrifying reality…

All over the world, people are suffering from the way they are forced to earn their living. Especially in the countries of the so-called »Third World«, and particularly in North Africa, the oppression by Western imperialism seems to have reached a level that people can no longer bear. I find the name given to the struggle of the Arab peoples very sadly telling… I associate spring with a vibrant, joyful awakening. The »Arab Spring«, on the other hand, now in its second year, holds nothing joyful for me. It is a desperate struggle of the powerless against a seemingly invincible superpower…

This really shocks me. I look up again at the airship above me and try to push away the thought that the raw materials being transported there were once extracted using child labor. Of course, this is part of human history and thankfully has nothing to do with today's methods of raw material extraction. Nevertheless, it's not a pleasant thought that things were different over eighty years ago.

"Hmm, I'm not sure... about the communicator, for example. Do you mean the motherboard? Or the memory or processor?" Alfredo interrupts my thoughts.

"Yes and no, the raw materials are probably flying overhead right now, but the components are manufactured respectively on-site in the FabBots."

"Oh, now I understand why it took so long to make my communicator; my old one went overboard in a storm. And there was nothing left to recycle for the FabBot," Alfredo grins contentedly. "Yeah, yeah, you campus know-it-alls, you always think you know everything!" he mutters, and starts to untie himself and disappear below deck.

"Wait a second, Alfredo! Where did you get that pink life vest? It looks awesome!"

Alfredo suddenly looks at me as if he had been waiting for this question.

“Well, Mika, I got it from Knut. And Knut got it from Tami, the harbor master in Fuerteventura, but that was quite a while ago. And when he wanted to get rid of the vest later, I just took it… Pink suits me,” he says and goes below deck with a smile.

›Will Knut ever tell me what really happened back then?‹ I wonder. The Orion's radio network is still active, and my communicator has already received several messages,

but the reception hasn't stopped yet. Besides messages from campus, there are also some from Lares, Leyla, and Simon. They've obviously tried to reach me. I have a bad feeling about this. Ajola is also among them with a text message, which I'll read later.

I click on Leyla's name. The connection to her is established. It barely rings and she answers.

"Hi Mika, nice to hear from you," she greets me. "Where are you right now?"

Her voice sounds rough and somewhat hoarse. *›Perhaps the connection...‹*

"Hi Mom, we're on our way to Dakar and unexpectedly got a cell signal in the middle of the ocean," I begin uncertainly. "What's new with you? I see you all tried to reach me almost at the same time a few days ago. How's Grandpa?"

I notice my own voice is trembling and I have a lump in my throat. Now that I'm talking to her, I almost feel sick. She doesn't answer for several long seconds. The connection is actually very good, because I can hear her breathing.

"Oh Mika, Noram passed away four days ago..." she finally says, followed by a deep sigh. "The nurses at the hospice had provided him with sodium pentobarbital at his own request," she adds after a moment, her voice composed again. "During the last visits, Grandpa had complained of increasingly severe pain... and increasing the pain medication hadn't brought any relief... he had decided for himself that this was the way he wanted to go."

The details come across as if from a news channel. That's just how my mother is. In difficult situations, she can act as if none of it affects her at all.

“We knew that,” she adds, and somehow that sounds like an apology to me.

“Were you able to talk to him about it again? Did he make his decision known?” I manage to ask.

“No, Mika. Simon visited him just the day before and was able to speak with him briefly, but not a word about it came up. At least, I don’t know anything about it…”

›What's bothering you, Mom?‹ I wonder, while she still seems to be gasping for air.

„Noram hat dann in der Nacht das Medikament selbst eingenommen und ist einfach nicht mehr wach geworden. Wir bekamen dann tags drauf einen Anruf.“

›Aha, she's really angry with him... She only calls Grandpa by his name when she's angry...‹

“Oh dear, I had a feeling something like that might happen…”, I interject briefly to give her a break.

I have to take a deep breath myself. It seems Grandpa hadn't told anyone about his actual situation. He must have been suffering terribly from the pain.

“During our shore leave in Tangier,” I begin again, “I was able to reach Lares and he had already hinted at something like this. The last time I was with Noram, I had no idea that it could all end so quickly for him.”

The words fall as if into a dark hole. No echo, nothing, as if they were unnecessary, meaningless…

"How did Lares and Simon take the news?" I ask after a while.

"Simon is experiencing two different and contradictory feelings," my mother says, as if they were strangers. "On the one hand, he's happy that his father is free from his suffering, but on the other hand, he misses his father very much. Lares is probably sad, I can tell, but he doesn't talk about it. I think I'll give him the time he needs."

I wonder how she manages to talk like that. I can tell it affects her at least as deeply as it does me.

"And you, Mom? How are you doing?"

"We all shed many tears at the burial in the forest cemetery. I'll miss Noram too," Leyla says drily.

Now I understand why she's so angry: She's angry because he left her out, because he didn't tell any of us and preferred to die alone… *›Did he have to do that?‹*

The headphones and the display indicate that the network connection is becoming unstable.

“We’re about to lose radio contact…” I say hastily. “Please say hi to everyone for me, and I love you all! I’ll call you again when we get to Dakar,” I shout to her.

“We love you…” I manage to hear before the connection is lost.

›That could have stayed operational for a few more minutes...,‹ I grumble to myself. My eyes follow the »Orion«, which was just visible against the sky and now disappears from view. I go below deck. The weather outside is exactly how I feel inside. I don't need both at the same time.

Brief Stop in Dakar

I'm reading Ajola's message for the third time now. I still can't quite make sense of it. She expresses her condolences on Grandpa's death. Okay. Understandable. But the passage about her new project, which she started with a certain Raoul on campus, just doesn't make any sense. It's full of technical details that I neither need nor want to know, and it constantly goes on about how great Raoul's ideas are. *›Is she trying to annoy me? Who is this guy anyway?‹* It suddenly occurs to me that, if I'm honest with myself, I haven't really thought about Ajola in the last few days and weeks. But now that I'm reading her message, it hits me with such force that I'm having trouble processing it. *›Strange...‹* Ajola doesn't write anything clear about this Raoul, but the guy seems to be in every sentence. *›Raoul this and Raoul that...‹*

I toss the electronic measuring probes I'm using to try and figure out why the FabBot isn't working into the toolbox, roughly and angrily. *›What the...,‹* I start to grumble, really annoyed, as Joshua nudges me from the side.

“Look up ahead! The Dakar peninsula has just appeared in front of us!” he exclaims excitedly, pointing with outstretched arm towards the bow of the »Colombo«.

“Yes, I see it!” I reply, annoyed, and look in the indicated direction. “But why are you so excited, man? You’re not here for the first time… are you?”

"I can tell you that!" he replies proudly, beaming at me. "My sister lives here with her family, and I'm really looking forward to seeing her again."

I look at Joshua in surprise. He definitely doesn't look Senegalese.

“Okay, but how did your sister end up in Senegal?” I ask in a remarkably calm voice.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re wondering, aren’t you?” he grins broadly at me. “Four years ago, Chaja, my sister, accompanied me on this trip. She wanted to get out and see something different through an exchange program, just like you. Shortly after, she got pregnant by her boyfriend Nibori, they formed a family partnership, and now she’s pregnant again, and I’m going to be an uncle for probably the third time,” he babbles.

“Wait, wait, all I hear is bus station…” I throw up my hands. “Nibori isn’t a Senegalese name… is it?”

“You listened very carefully!” Joshua grins. “No, not Senegalese. Nibori is a Japanese name. My brother-in-law Nibori came to Dakar for the exchange program

back then, just like Chaja. That’s how they met. It’s a small world, isn’t it?”

"Aha..." I try to process this. "And how will you become an uncle three times over in four years, and why only »probably«?" I try to find out patiently.

"Man, the first time it was twins, what do you think! I was an uncle twice over in one fell swoop. And now, I'm curious again... maybe it'll be multiples again! Then you can do the math..."

"Okay, that's enough for now..." I smile at him, "shall we place a bet?"

My anger has subsided for now; I can't really perceive it anymore, and I don't want to think about it anymore. Joshua's uncle-like behavior is doing me good. I'm now looking more closely and with interest into the distance. The Dakar peninsula is still just a very narrow shadow on the horizon, but we're making good progress, and I, as an experienced sailor, can already estimate that we'll be going ashore there in about two hours.

"Listen up, everyone," Leandra's voice booms from the loudspeakers.

I'll turn the headset back on so I can understand her better.

"We will soon reach the port of Dakar and the four pallets that are being unloaded here still need to be made ready for transport. The cargo must be securely lashed and the transport straps can be prepared in advance."

In the background I can hear Knut talking to Leandra. Leandra answers him. Then Knut can be heard.

“I need two people to help out and two more for the new cargo we’re picking up in Dakar,” he says.

“And please bear in mind that our stay in Dakar will only last a few hours. The community house is reserved, so unfortunately we can’t stay overnight,” Leandra explains. “I’m so sorry, I would have liked to give us a day ashore.”

“That’s awful!” Joshua huffs. “I thought we could celebrate a bit with my family tonight… I’ll have to talk to Chaja and Nibori about what we could do together in such a short time…”

Joshua frantically taps on his communicator, trying to explain the situation to his sister. I see on my communicator that enough people have already signed up for the loading activities. Since I'm essentially off duty, I gather some information about Dakar and the surrounding area. Unfortunately, the cross-search I programmed using

Ethan's notebooks isn't returning any results related to Dakar. *›I need to refine the search a bit... or maybe Ethan didn't write anything about Dakar...‹* I make a mental note. I simply open the next unread notebook entry.

September 17, 2034

Today is day 28 of our journey and we have arrived near Bruchsal. Here, at the edge of the Black Forest, we want to look for a place where we might be able to stay.

Traveling with Arthur is becoming increasingly difficult. We sometimes have to transport him in a bicycle trailer, as he often can no longer ride or walk himself. Our food supplies are almost gone, and traveling at night is very tiring for all of us. Traveling with Arthur in the trailer is even more strenuous, as we then have to push the bike, trailer, and Arthur uphill.

So far, we haven't managed to cover more than about seven or eight kilometers a day, often much less – according to my statistics. Luckily, the weather is currently remaining relatively stable, dry, and mild enough that our long breaks and sleeping in the woods aren't a problem. However, finding food is slowly becoming an issue…

There are quite a few people out and about, heading in different directions. On the one hand, I wonder where they're all going, but on the other hand, I'm glad that not everyone is walking in our direction. That way, we have a chance of remaining largely unseen.

Interestingly, the larger towns seem to be deserted, and we can cross them almost without any problems. Roadblocks have so far been set up mainly outside the towns, presumably to intercept fleeing people. Just yesterday, we saw a group of people harvesting crops in the fields under heavy armed guard.

Today we set up camp in a beech and hazelnut grove, relatively close to the road, but still very well hidden. That was our luck, because around noon a military vehicle pulled up on the road and the driver relieved himself on the shoulder. The door remained open, and we overheard the radio transmission. The passenger also got

out and lit a cigarette, his weapon at the ready. Neither of them looked in our direction. The voice on the radio reported that the number of people living in the major cities had drastically decreased – estimates ranged around fifty percent. It was also reported that many people had starved to death or been killed in fights. Furthermore, it was said that a new, intense conflict over resources had erupted on the border between NATO and Russia. The report ended with a warning to all members of the armed forces: should they desert or commit treason, they would face immediate execution as punishment.

All of this sounds like something from another planet to us, living in our little world of escape. Even the name NATO suddenly worried me so much that I had to force myself to breathe calmly so as not to wake Arthur and Adina. Noram also looked at me with great concern. A war is the last thing we need right now. Noram is still so young; it's fortunate that this situation has at least ensured he hasn't been drafted into military service.

What we do know for sure, however, is that if someone owns fertile land and plants it to feed themselves, they are always in constant danger of being robbed and even killed by others.

It seems that hardly anyone can stop the coarsening of social interactions. Yet there is a small minority of people – to which we also belong – who are aware of their potential for compromise and cooperation. I hope that we will soon be able to effectively develop this potential together with others…

October 5, 2034

The many events of the last few weeks have left me little time to describe everything that has happened each day. We've been incredibly lucky once again! And I write this with deep gratitude!

We found a community that was immediately ready to take us in. In retrospect, that seems like a miracle. We had just set up camp in a small wooded area near a major intersection in the direction of Karls-

ruhe. Noram had gotten ready for the first watch, and Adina, Arthur, and I had already slipped into our sleeping bags. A short time later, a man and a teenager appeared before us, seemingly out of nowhere. Noram didn't even have time to pull the safety cord tied to my ankle to alert me. The man signaled with a clear gesture to remain completely calm. Both crouched down beside us. The younger one pointed toward the road, which ran about a hundred meters away, and we saw an armed patrol that had just begun setting up a roadblock.

They urged us to come with them immediately, as the area had become far too dangerous. They were on their way back from Karlsruhe, where they had been out as a »procurement group«, as they put it, and now wanted to return to their settlement.

We quickly and silently packed our things and followed them. The younger one, who was quite strong, supported Arthur without hesitation, while the older one pushed Arthur's bicycle. The path through the woods, not even a discernible trail, was not easy to navigate with the loaded bicycles. But after about twenty minutes, we finally reached a forest road, and our rescuers properly introduced themselves. They explained that they were members of a solidarity community near the Walzbach Valley and warmly invited us all to join them.

I was speechless and didn't know what to say at first. Noram was a bit more quick-witted and had gratefully accepted their offer for us. We initially thought we could only stay for a short rest. But when we wanted to thank them for their hospitality, we discovered that they were apparently looking for people to join them, and the older man, who turned out to be one of the community's founders, told us he hoped we could imagine becoming part of their community.

But they hardly know us, I retorted, unable to believe what I was hearing. He only simply said he could immediately recognize honest and good people and laughed heartily. I saw Arthur smile at his words, Adina burst into tears, and Noram forgot to close his mouth.

And at that point, we hadn't even arrived at the community yet.

We've been here for a week now, and it's all still true. The community is living in an old manor house, and we've been given two small rooms in the attic. With almost thirty people, the group already feels quite large to us. There are even a few children. I haven't quite settled in yet; I'm still kind of on my way, but I think that will soon change…

We've learned some new things about world events. The community also has a solar power system and therefore electricity, so Noram was able to charge his satellite phone and search for news channels. I'll jot down some of the new information we've learned. Much of it doesn't directly affect our situation, but it's significant in the overall context of this global catastrophe.

Rising sea levels are not only affecting coastal regions of the mainland. Island nations like Oceania and Polynesia are also increasingly losing their low-lying areas or are disappearing entirely beneath the waves. Powerful storms and tsunamis are devastating the coastal regions of the South China Sea and Japan.

Intercontinental transport chains have clearly ceased to exist. Nothing is really moving by land, sea, or air. The few remaining freight shipments are heavily guarded by soldiers.

Oil extraction and production have apparently come to a complete standstill. Only the large armies and a few regional warlords still possess oil and fuel reserves.

It's all rather unpleasant, but now that I think about it more closely, it all seems to be following its predictable, systemic course. A »Great Transformation« is underway, and we, here in Walzbachtal, are a part of it.

These entries are a bit of a surprise for me, as my hometown is mentioned for the first time. *›The journey to Walzbachtal was a risky adventure for my ancestors...‹* I find it perfectly normal that there were such helpful people. I've never experienced it any other way. But at the time Ethan went through this and wrote about it, the circum-

stances that shaped people's lives were completely different. Despite Ethan's notes, I can hardly imagine what it must have felt like to live back then. *›I'm really glad they made it...‹*

I try on the off chance to find some more notebook entries from the period immediately following. I'm very curious to see how everything developed.

> *October 30, 2036*
>
> *The volcanic ash in the atmosphere is decreasing; the sky is increasingly bright blue, and the intensity of the sunshine is steadily going up week by week. No new reports of further volcanic eruptions have been heard on the radio. It's raining quite frequently and heavily, which is clearing the air. The fallen volcanic ash has seeped into the ground all summer, enriching it with nutrients. Compared to last year, we've had a more »bountiful« harvest in the gardens this time. Some of it is currently being preserved in canning jars. We've become very cautious, even though there's considerably more food available now. It will have to last us through the coming winter. We were able to sow a lot in the fields, but not much has sprouted yet.*
>
> *However, things feel a bit better and more relaxed now. During the day, the natural sunlight is sufficient to grow vegetables in our greenhouse and provide for ourselves. The solar panels now produce enough electricity to power the radio and a computer during the day without the usual bicycle assistance. The batteries then last long enough in the evening that we don't need candles until bedtime. If things continue like this, we'll definitely be on the right track.*
>
> *Noram now uses his old smartphone as a mini-computer and was surprised to discover in recent days that it had received a signal from a cell tower. He immediately tried to make a call, but this proved impossible and the signal disappeared very quickly.*
>
> *This seems to be a sign that something is changing. It would be good to know who is behind it, though. Because through the community's radio network, we learn that the elites' private armies are largely disintegrating, and with them, the centers of the old power.*

Apparently, there are too few people left willing to participate, and ammunition has become a scarce commodity. The raids of the once-powerful are becoming increasingly rare.

We had all of this confirmed in person yesterday. A man found us yesterday and asked us to take him in. He told us that he had served in the army in the Palatinate and that he could no longer tolerate the killing and constant military coercion there. That's why he ran away with two others. The other two went north, as that's where they originally came from. He's from the Black Forest, near Freiburg, but he's too weak to travel any further and is happy to have learned about our community. He's thirty-four and his name is Frank.

Frank shared with us the latest information he had obtained through army communications. While the data is over a month old, it's relatively new to us. He says that the death rate from hunger and disease has reached a new record high. In some regions, especially in cities, it's approaching 70 percent, and in rural areas, around 30 percent. Globally, it's estimated that almost half the world's population has died from hunger, war, or disease in recent years.

In that regard, I'm so glad that Mario and Isabel's children are slowly but surely recovering. When the couple joined us a month ago, little Maik and Jonas were so emaciated that Adina was genuinely worried about whether they would make it. Luckily, we have Andrea here, who is very knowledgeable about medicinal plants and, apparently, also about small children. She's not a doctor, but she's been able to help many of us so far. Without her remedies and her knowledge, we would all have a much lower chance of survival; I'm absolutely convinced of that.

At radio meetings, many communities report that they are constantly being approached by people who want to join them. Many have fled the increasingly deserted outskirts of the surrounding major cities.

December 9, 2036

»…Restoring normality« and »contributing to the reconstruction…« –

this all sounds very familiar. Adina also thinks that this can only be the same old propaganda being broadcast on the old radio stations. We only found out about it at the last radio meeting – I wouldn't have even considered switching on an old radio again. We simply don't have enough electricity for that. But at the radio meeting, they said that some »official stations« have gone back on the air and that it might be worth listening to them, because they offer hope.

I listened to some of the so-called »broadcasts for hope« and I'm truly outraged and frightened. It's nothing less than a clumsy attempt by the old elites, who still have access to these functioning facilities… I don't know exactly who's really behind it… They obviously want to use the improving weather and the slowly increasing harvests to restore the old regimes, rules, and laws.

I can only assume that the military and intelligence services, together with politicians and formerly very wealthy individuals, are trying to revive the collapsed old capitalist order. The broadcasts, just like before the collapse, promise the moon, »ONLY« if everyone returns to the decommissioned factories and resumes their jobs to participate in the collective »reconstruction«... Adina, Noram, and I don't believe anything good can come of this and are doing everything we can to explain the true situation to the people in the community and work towards real and lasting change. This is no easy task, however, because the promise of »normality« is very tempting for many after the hardships of recent years.

However, we have received support from many other communities – numerous voices report that in their environments, people no longer follow demagogues and are decisively resisting their influence. Much points to a comprehensive, fundamental shift across the globe. One only needs to look and listen closely to sense it. Armies are dissolving everywhere, just like the old monetary systems, despite desperate attempts to prevent this, even by force – we hear this from people who are experiencing it firsthand in different locations on every continent. It's astonishing how many people are broadcasting via

longwave radio, if one only has the patience to scan for their frequencies and then, with a bit of luck, understands their language.

It is also telling that everyone we speak to overwhelmingly feels a profound sadness in the face of the enormous mass extinction that has been witnessed everywhere and is still ongoing. The loss of life, whether human, animal, or plant, is so massive that many people feel an inner urge to simply withdraw in order to rediscover some stability on a smaller scale.

Personally, I see great potential in what has happened so far – the potential for spiritual growth, for new insights that won't be found in the comfort zone of the old elites… what is being attempted through the »official channels« is, in my view, a counter-evolution, not a counter-revolution, because what is happening to people right now is, in my view, an evolutionary process and not a transformation of the social strata of a disintegrating system… and an evolutionary change cannot be stopped once it has already begun… and it has, in my perception!

I'm deeply moved by the account of those events. I'm especially touched that so many people died not only from war or violence, but also from lack of food and inadequate medical care. The regenerative power that must have still existed within those who survived also seems truly impressive to me. It suddenly becomes very clear to me that everything I see around me now was recreated by those very people.

I start again the communicator search for historical data about Dakar with a slightly refined query configuration. I want to get at least a basic picture of the area. Some information is listed. The »Colombo« has now almost reached the waters in front of the port. The rise in sea level has caused parts of Dakar's old town to be underwater. That's why the new port was built further northeast about twenty years ago. Particularly striking are the towers of some mosques and parts of the African Renaissance Monument, which still protrude from the water. The old residential areas were abandoned, and new ones were built around the newly constructed port.

“Hey Mika, you’re a welcome guest, my family invited you over this afternoon,” Joshua calls to me. “So, what do you say? Are you coming?”

“Um, I don’t know. You two probably want to be alone and have a lot to talk

about…” I reply, a little surprised.

“Nonsense, Mika, we talk regularly, we don’t have that much personal stuff to discuss. Besides, my brother-in-law is an excellent baker and is making some dumplings for us, and he’s expecting you to come. And his gyoza are the best, you’ll be surprised!” he tries to convince me.

“What about Ava, is she coming too?” I ask awkwardly.

“Yes, of course, Chaja and Ava are like best friends… Ava even thought of bringing a gift for her pregnant sister-in-law before we left. She knitted two baby onesies in different colors. They look great!” Joshua bursts out with a loud laugh.

“Okay, okay, thank you so much for the invitation,” I give up, “I’ll come along for a bit and then take a walk back to the ship. Is that alright with you?”

We're currently passing the old harbor area, and the partially submerged remains of the old town rise surrealistically from the water. A child in the arms of a statue points out to the sea. The »Colombo« is slowly turning north, and the new harbor facilities are now clearly visible.

Dakar - Accra / Tema

Final Leg to Accra

The wind and waves aren't just causing problems for the »Colombo«; more than a few faces are looking green as well. We're sailing right into the middle of a massive

thunderstorm. I'm using the rope safety system to pull myself down towards the canteen, constantly searching for a firm handhold. *›Hungry at the wrong time leads to bruises.‹* My head still aches where it hit the door frame.

"You've got a strong stomach?" I hear Knut ask, who's probably on canteen duty. "What can I get you?" he grins cheekily at me.

"I need something warm for my stomach and something cool for my head," I reply, pointing to the bump on my forehead.

"You'll find a gel pack for your forehead in the freezer, and because you're hungry, I can offer you some soup. Okay?" he says, not particularly impressed.

"Sure, I'll take both."

I open the refrigerator and see a whole range of frozen items, but I can't really spot a gel pack.

"Look for something blue in a plastic tube," Knut calls from behind the counter, as if he knows I'm having trouble.

A blue brim, at the bottom, in the middle. *›Oh, there's something...‹* I hold the snow-dusted packet to my forehead. The coolness feels good.

“We left Dakar almost a week ago and are still stuck in this endless bad weather system,” Knut grumbles. “I’d love to feel the sun again and not just rain, lightning, and thunder.”

He places a steaming bowl of delicious-smelling soup on the counter. I take a spoon from the cutlery tray.

"Just you wait, the weather will probably improve again after Monrovia," I say, after glancing surreptitiously at the weather map on my communicator.

"Everyone's hoping for that today, but the weather'll have to hurry," Knut laughs. "We've been at the latitude of Monrovia for quite some time now."

I almost choke. *›Then my sea voyage is drawing to a close. I'll have to disembark the »Colombo« in Accra...‹* The realization hits me suddenly. The thought is almost palpable in my battered head. I somehow hadn't expected it to happen so soon. Even though it's clear the journey can't last forever, I realize how much I've already grown accustomed to the atmosphere on the ship. Our previous shore excursions mostly lasted only a few hours, like recently in Dakar, or at best included an overnight stay, as in Puerto del Rosario. Now I'm aware that the prospect of spending months on

land seems both challenging and enticing.

Challenging, because I'll miss all the new friends I've made here on board, and the journey itself. Enticing, because the journey will feel like it's continuing. On the ship, I feel like I'm in a time capsule, always at sea. We're constantly moving forward on the water, yet I seem to remain in the same place. This leg of the journey will end with the landing in Accra, and then it's onward into the completely unknown. I feel a bit like an explorer, filling in the last blank spaces on a map with symbols and color. This map is only within me, and only I know its blank spots. It's a good feeling, and yet still unknown.

›Did the great explorers of old feel the same way when they ventured into the truly unknown?‹ I wonder, a little sentimentally, and start typing my new search into the communicator. I want to learn something about the region before I go ashore. Besides maps and information from local sources, I also select some of Ethan's notes.

> *August 30, 2023*
>
> *I'm very worried about Zanga. He's currently in Burkina Faso, and the situation there has been quite precarious for the past few weeks. After the two coups Burkina Faso itself experienced last year, the coup in Niger a few weeks ago has further exacerbated the situation in West Africa, in addition to the existing economic and climate problems. It hasn't come to that yet, and I hope it never will, but the collapse of the ECOWAS alliance could quickly trigger a regional proxy war. The Americans and Europeans are currently losing important raw material reserves in West Africa. Burkina Faso is currently siding with the new government in Niger, thus putting itself in direct confrontation with Western interests. Zanga and his family, and everyone else in Burkina Faso, are in danger of being caught in the middle of a military conflict from which they have nowhere to escape. Zanga last contacted me a week ago, and there has been no further word from him since.*
>
> *Since the war in Ukraine, most recently with the devastating consequences for us here in Germany of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline being blown up, this development in West Africa is what worries me most. On the one hand, I'm appalled that something like this is happening.*

On the other hand, especially in connection with West Africa, I'm glad that there's finally some sort of end to the colonial era in the region. For decades, Europe has been extracting resources from there, particularly uranium, which is crucial for the energy sector, while otherwise leaving the local population to starve, quite literally.

The only »good« news I can think of in this context is that the last nuclear power plants in Germany were shut down this year. I have to admit that I never believed this would actually happen. I'm glad I was wrong – at least until now…

January 13, 2032

I'm really worried about where all this is leading. Things don't look good in the world. Since I arrived here at Zanga's, the bad news has been piling up. Yes, I understand that many people don't see things this way at all and can't question them... at least from my perspective, they can't possibly grasp what's really going on.

But now for the not-so-dangerous aspects of life: It turns out that Zanga has a good, amicable relationship with the mother of their son Jitu, but they aren't married. Just like Zanga wasn't married to Yaya's mother either. I have to chuckle, because Zanga doesn't strike me as the kind of man who lays his eggs in other people's nests like a cuckoo. Anyway, after what felt like weeks of traveling to get here, the three of us are now sharing the rather small house that Zanga calls his own here in Koti. Basically, it's just one room where we can sleep at night: Zanga on the floor, on an old mattress, and Noram and I sharing the »bed«... Well, Noram and I are definitely used to something more comfortable. Zanga seems embarrassed, but I don't bring it up with him yet; I know how proud he is of himself, and I don't want to offend him. Luckily, we get to have lots of conversations with the people here, so we basically only use his place for sleeping. And the village is actually very beautiful and peaceful once you get used to the local customs…

The issues we're dealing with here are unfortunately not so pleasant.

The perceptions of the people here differ considerably from how we in the »West« view things.

The climate agreement has failed to achieve its repeatedly reaffirmed goals due to the economic policies of a few states (USA, Russia, Gulf States, etc.). Warnings from the scientific community are overridden by economic interests and thus rendered ineffective. The so-called »aid programs« of the UN and EU are either swallowed up by local corruption or fail to achieve their intended goals on the ground, instead producing the exact opposite effect. As a consequence of global warming, freshwater reserves on the planet have become extremely scarce. The industrial production of food, as claimed by Western nations, has stalled due to water shortages and political unrest in »supplier countries« such as those in Africa, the Philippines, and Central and South America. Zanga and the people here in Koti know this all too well…

Speculation with food and resources is being carried out extremely ruthlessly by the most powerful corporations, such as Monsanto, and behind the scenes by BlackRock and Vanguard, as well as by the states of China, Russia, and the USA. If people here weren't already used to getting by on very little, what's happening now would be like a death sentence for them… we in Germany aren't really worried about it, but Adina and I have already noticed in our circles that the spiraling prices of food are now causing headaches even for the middle class.

Meanwhile, exorbitant sums are being spent to defend the borders of wealthy EU states, even with armed force, against »economic migrants« who are created by the economic policies of these very EU states. In my opinion, nationalism in Europe has reached its highest level since the Nazi era, and it seems only a matter of time before a global war breaks out over increasingly scarce resources.

I spoke to Adina on the phone yesterday, and she said that the current irresponsible use of artificial intelligence is one of the main reasons for increased unemployment in some sectors. So much for the

»humanization« of jobs! The big corporations are only interested in reducing personnel costs: people are expensive and demanding, AI can replace them and demands nothing, except, of course, the enormous energy consumption of the data centers…

There's no sign of that here in Koti. The people here are just trying to survive every day. Water and food can't be digitized.

Noram and I are worried about Adina… and also about Jitu… Noram says that Jitu had written to him about massive unrest in Frankfurt, which was, however, quelled by police riot squads in combat gear with sheer force.

March 3, 2037

I am in contact with more and more communities via longwave radio. In Germany, there are now over two hundred communities participating in the communication. All are located in rural areas; none come from any of the larger cities.

Many have reported receiving »visits« from »activists« of old political groups promoting a »Union of Germans«. These »activists« are usually accompanied by armed individuals who, however, make no attempt to use violence. The likely explanation, also offered by the reporting communities, is that their number of supporters must be vanishingly small, and trust within their own ranks has apparently eroded. The old instrument of power—money—is now worthless. And the vast number of deceased acts, even for these people, as a psychological barrier that seems to prevent any excesses of violence. In our community, we have not yet received any such unpleasant visits, and we could certainly do without them.

For the first time, we are receiving direct messages from other regions of the world during our radio meeting, from people who are in regular contact with the communities networked in Germany. The situation in the USA, Canada, Russia, China, India, Australia, Brazil, and Argentina doesn't seem to be much better. Only on the African continent, specifically in the equatorial zone, do the effects of the cli-

mate catastrophe appear to have been somewhat less severe. But even there, the population has been drastically reduced by mass death.

I'd love to hear from Zanga and Jitu, but they haven't found a way to communicate yet. I wonder if they're all right…

From my perspective, it's encouraging that, with very few exceptions, people all over the world are refusing to follow the old capitalist system. The news that a new way of life could be established is spreading by word of mouth and via longwave radio at our radio meetings. We're trying to support this as best we can from here.

Now that the climate situation seems to be stabilizing, it is becoming increasingly important for people to create new community structures, to dedicate themselves to them, and to try to build this new way of life with local resources.

There are even reports that people who previously belonged to the elite are now distancing themselves from them and prefer a simpler life in newly emerging communities. Social affiliation with one's own community increasingly acts as a self-reinforcing factor of change.

Noram is currently traveling to Darmstadt with two other young men, hoping to obtain urgently needed equipment from the university. He's also thinking of Jitu, who, even before leaving, had mentioned wanting to get a radio for Koti. When Jitu said goodbye and said he planned to come back, Noram resolved to find radio equipment for him and Koti, which Jitu could then perhaps take with him.

As always, I'm amazed by the wealth of detail my great-grandfather recorded over the years. I'm also better at processing it now. A large puzzle landscape has formed in my mind, and each new note from my grandfather now fits into it as if by itself. There are still large gaps, and some of the puzzle notes stand all alone in the middle of nowhere. But I've begun to develop a sense of the era in which my great-grandfather lived.

I reread the last message I received from Grandma Kyara and Grandpa Jitu in Dakar on my communicator. So, I'll also be meeting my cousin Kasim in Accra, who's

traveling with me to Burkina Faso for the planned family celebration. And not just him. We still have components on the ship for the project in Burkina Faso that I'll be working on. If I remember correctly, someone from the project will also be waiting for us at the port. That means they'll be waiting for me too. I'm a little nervous about that. I don't know anyone from the project personally yet, since all communication has been electronic so far.

"Well, how's it going?" Knut's voice wakes me, and I jump back slightly because the guy is now standing a hand's breadth away from me, looking directly into my eyes with a questioning expression.

"Um..." I begin firmly, but Knut immediately interrupts me.

"You've been spooning away at the empty bowl for a full minute now... where are your thoughts, my boy? Probably at home, eh?" he mutters to himself and walks away without waiting for my reply.

He's right. Where am I? The bowl of soup is indeed empty, and I notice that the wind seems to have died down. The »Colombo« has become calmer. Meanwhile, I'm growing increasingly restless.

On my way back from visiting Joshua's sister, I last called Grandma Kyara and Grandpa Jitu. They asked me where I was on my journey to see them. They both knew when I had left and had spoken regularly with Leyla and Simon. But they hadn't heard from me personally in quite some time. I'm still shocked at how old Grandpa Jitu looked. I feel like I've been traveling for years, even though it hasn't even been two months. I can still picture the last video call before I left. I seem to remember that they both looked healthier and stronger back then.

›Maybe I'm just imagining all this.‹ But I can't help it. I'm a little worried. Our conversation, however, gave me no reason to be. They were both obviously very happy to see me and said they were eagerly awaiting my arrival. That they were all very curious about me there, also because of the family celebration. Right now, though, I don't know if I should be so happy about it. I don't know what to really expect there. Somehow, I think it's good that a cousin will be meeting me in Accra. That way, I have the opportunity to gradually acclimate to the family.

Knut has reappeared in front of me as if from nowhere and takes away the empty soup bowl.

"I think you should get some fresh air, son! And stop moping around! It's not

healthy at your age..." I can still hear him say while he is rinsing the soup bowl.

The ship is completely calm now, and I don't even need to hold on as I make my way up to the deck. Through the open bulkhead, I can see the blue sky. I find a place to sit and reread the notebook entry that my last search had listed.

> *June 7, 2037*
>
> *Yesterday our community grew again. The young people obviously made good use of the improved weather last autumn. Peter and Elke had little Ada. With her, I believe we've now reached forty-six. Ada is, after Matthias, the second baby in our community.*
>
> *Everyone is delighted, and Adina and I can't help but chuckle at Noram, who clearly isn't thinking about having children right now. Although, someone in our community has already set their sights on Noram. He prefers organizational work, which pleases me greatly, because without his invaluable help, our network wouldn't be nearly as advanced.*
>
> *We recently received news via radio of the American Navy's »great shore leave« in Asia. We are overjoyed. The crew of an American aircraft carrier has apparently revolted against their own commanders. They were supported by the crews of the carrier's remaining escort fleet. The entire task force eventually anchored in South Asia, and all ships, aircraft, and weapons were deliberately disabled and rendered inoperable. The crews of all ships then went ashore, some joining the communities forming there, others establishing their own. Only a very few fanatical military personnel, mostly high-ranking officers, remain on the now-unusable ships.*
>
> *I feel that this is one of the most significant moments of the pervasive transformation. In the radio forum, it was called »the major shore leave« of the former US Navy. I hope that this step will trigger a cascade of similar events in the coming months, ultimately leading to the complete disbandment of all military forces worldwide.*
>
> *This would fit with other reports from the surrounding communities. Here too, army personnel are increasingly refusing to serve in the*

> *armed forces and the remaining elite. They usually wish to be accepted into existing communities or to form new communities with their families.*
>
> *Our hope of having passed through the dark valley is slowly being fulfilled. What was planted in the fields of our communities in the spring is already growing splendidly, and further planting is in full swing. The weather has improved considerably; there is sufficient sun and rain for sowing.*
>
> *The bitter news, however, is that many reports indicate that armed clashes are repeatedly occurring in urban areas… fortunately for us, we in Walzbachtal have been spared from this so far.*

I have a feeling I read similar information about a shore leave in the list from local sources. A few clicks bring the information back up. It seems that a memorial was also erected somewhere in the port of Accra to mark this special moment. One of the warships of a major power also anchored here permanently. The sailors went ashore here, and many settled in the area. I don't know if I'll be able to pass by, but it would certainly be interesting.

Roads and Waterways

Arrival in Tema

The view of the coast behind the old port in Tema is quite unfamiliar to me. The coast of the former state of Ghana, as I discovered in the articles on MultiNet, offers few suitable places for ships to dock. I suspect this is why the »Colombo« didn't dock directly in Accra. Tema used to have an oil refinery, for which a separate port facility was built. Apparently, Tema is still the only place near Accra where maritime freight traffic can take place. At first glance, the landscape appears relatively flat, stretching far inland. From here, at the railing of the »Colombo«, I can clearly see the port cranes, but otherwise just a lot of low buildings, most of which are currently disused and slowly decaying from the elements. The port facilities themselves, however, are in some parts very well preserved. Besides the »Colombo«, three other ships are docked, their cargoes currently being unloaded.

›Obviously there's still a lot of traffic... I wonder why?‹ I'm asking myself, as I watch the people on the quay as they secure the components that had also accompanied me on the »Colombo« to some freight wagons.

The loading activities on the »Colombo« are proceeding routinely and appear to be well underway. I'm a little surprised, as I actually want to help. A glance towards our loading crane confirms my suspicions. Knut and Joshua are working away as if they've already finished. On the bridge, I see Leandra engaged in lively conversation with the harbor master, glancing every now and then at the group around Knut, Joshua, and the others. The two of them had been operating the loading crane on the »Colombo« and filling the loading platform with crates. Leandra and the harbor master are obviously already exchanging the shipping documents, and I then see the harbor master say goodbye to the captain.

›It's about time I packed my things here.‹ I expertly clamber down to my cabin and stand in the doorway for a moment. I try to absorb the moment before I stow everything in my backpack and tidy up my cabin. No sooner have I finished and reached the deck again than Leandra approaches me.

"Mika, how are you?" she beams at me, as if she wants to give me a gift.

I look at her, a little embarrassed. I still don't really know how I should act around her. On the one hand, she's always very friendly to me. On the other hand, though, she's distant and always gives me the feeling that she's only talking to me because she feels she absolutely has to be friendly to the people who are staying on her ship for a while. Maybe I'm being unfair to her, but I just can't figure her out.

"Um..." I try to start an answer, but she just keeps talking.

"It seems to me you've reached another milestone on your journey, is that right?"

I suspect I must be looking at her rather confused right now. She continues to smile and follows along in a quiet voice, so that only I can hear it.

"Hey, what's wrong? You seem a bit lost. I'm asking because I, we, will definitely miss you on the »Colombo« as we continue our journey. We always have new people joining us on the trip, and they all become part of our crew. An important part. Just like you."

She looks directly at me and is clearly very attentive. I'm a little overwhelmed by the revelation. To be honest, it's all a bit too much for me right now, and I don't know what to say. She obviously notices this and changes the subject to something more concrete.

"Tell me, how did you like our ship and the time at sea?" she asks, looking at me curiously.

I understand that now. I can definitely sense her curiosity, but it's still not easy for me to talk to her.

“Yes, I’ve come a long way on my journey…” I begin awkwardly. “Thank you for the opportunity to travel with you…” I continue, still quite unsure of the tone I should use.

“Yes, yes, that’s fine. Mika, that goes without saying for us. As I said, you’re not the first, and you certainly won’t be the last, to accompany us on our journeys across the world’s oceans. But the question was: How did you enjoy your time with us?”

›That sounds like an order... very clear and distinct...‹

“Um, yes… I really enjoyed my time on the »Colombo«…” I try again, “…And seafaring has opened up many perspectives for me that I didn’t know existed before…?”

“Well,” Leandra interrupts, “if you were to stand at attention and salute right now,

you would indeed be a model sailor," she says in a mock-serious voice, and I realize that she's having a very hard time suppressing her laughter. "Dear Mika, I'm not just the captain of the »Colombo« here, but also a fellow shipmate on a long voyage, and I'd like to know how you're doing… Okay? And there's no evaluation or any kind of grade for that…"

I have to smile myself and take a few more relaxed breaths before I start again.

"Well, we haven't really talked much so far... and I'm not quite sure what you expect from me. You are, after all, the captain of this ship, and for the past few weeks, it's been you whose instructions I've been following. But, to answer your question, yes, I've enjoyed it very much, and it's hard for me now that I might never see all these people again."

Leandra doesn't say anything this time. She just looks at me with big, warm eyes. I can't help thinking about my mother again, even though I don't want to. To end the moment, I continue:

"Now I'll have to get used to being on land again, I think. Every time I've been ashore so far, I've noticed how strange the immobility of the ground feels."

Leandra smiles, relaxed. I'm relaxed now too. The awkward moment is over.

"Yes, it will take a while," she says quietly but firmly. "In a few days, this will no longer be an issue."

And with that, the longest conversation with Leandra comes to an abrupt end. She continues laughing and disappears towards the bridge. I watch her go and lean against the ship's side. It suddenly dawns on me how deeply these smooth metal surfaces and the smells of sun, wind, and water have been permanently etched into my memory.

Not far from me, Joshua and Knut finish up work on the loading crane and move the platform aside. Ava joins them, picks up the platform's suspension cable, and stows it in a box.

"We already had our farewell party last night," Knut says when he notices me, and pats me on the shoulder. "Good luck and see you again, Mika," he wishes me, and I can see in his eyes that he truly means it.

"Have a good trip, dear Knut," I reply, knowing full well that words can never express what's going on inside me, inside us.

Joshua, Ava, and I often used the evenings during the trip as an opportunity to get to know each other better. We've become like friends, I'd say. Ava, the calm and balanced mechatronics engineer, made it clear quickly and unambiguously in our conversations that she saw her future as a mother. Joshua, however, was always somewhat terse on this topic and still envisioned his life on a grand voyage across the world's oceans. Soon they will only be a memory, who knows for how long.

"You two send me a photo!" I say to her, realizing I'm smiling at her the way I would only smile at my friends.

"What? Which photo?" Joshua asks, puzzled, without even looking at me.

Ava seems to be looking past me, too. I'm aware that this moment can't be comfortable for her either. I take one of Ava's hands and one of Joshua's and look directly at them both until they meet my gaze.

"Well, the one for your baby, please, when the time comes, okay?" I reply, winking.

"We'd love to!" Ava says happily, resting her head on Joshua's shoulder.

"I hate goodbyes," Joshua says, looking away again, past me.

We all have moist eyes, apparently. I pull them close and give them a quick, firm hug. A few last steps on the footbridge and I'm on the pier with my backpack, looking up at the deck of the »Colombo«. The two of them have disappeared from the railing. Actually, there's no one at the railing now. It feels strange, very strange…

Tema - Sokpoe

From Tema to Sokpoe

"Hey, are you Mika?", an unknown voice calls from behind me.

I turn around in surprise. In front of me stands a slim, young man, about my age, looking at me expectantly.

"I'm Kasim," he says. "If you're Mika, then we're cousins..." he concludes, smiling cheerfully.

"Oh yes, Kasim, great!" I say happily. "I wasn't expecting you yet. It's nice that you're picking me up here already."

"Why? Didn't Grandpa Jitu tell you about it? That I was coming to Tema? I thought we'd first take a little tour to Accra and through the Ghanaian hinterland..." he asks, puzzled.

"Oh yes, sure, nice idea, but I arrived here with the materials for the irrigation project near Gorom-Gorom and I'm going to meet the people from the project here first," I explain to him in one breath. "Only, I don't see them yet. I expected them to be at the pier," I say, a little irritated.

"Irrigation project?" Kasim looks at me with wide eyes. "Hmm, Grandpa Jitu really can keep everything to himself, the old smart aleck..." he says, sounding somewhat dissatisfied. "Anyway, if that's the case, then we need to see where your people have gone, right?" he says briefly, turns on his heels, and strides purposefully toward the large garage on the other side of the pier.

I follow him without asking any further questions. He certainly knows his way around here better. Two men are standing next to the garage door, seemingly watching us with interest. Kasim stops in front of them and asks politely, but also directly:

"Hey, how are you? There's a shipment for an irrigation project in Burkina Faso. Do you happen to know how it will get there?"

One of the men, around forty, stocky and wearing only a muscle shirt, looks at Kasim with a smile and answers as if he had expected the question.

"Of course, we'll transport the cargo to Sokpoe."

"To Sokpoe?" Kasim wondered. "Why Sokpoe? Is it going to be transported by water? Not by freight train?"

The second man, somewhat younger but surprisingly already having almost white hair, takes a step towards us, turns slightly and then points inside:

"Here are the two Camions for transport to Sokpoe. The shipment is already loaded onto the trailer, but you should have already seen that."

›Camions?‹ My communicator says that's the French word for truck. *›Aha, now I understand... but on the water?‹* I must look a bit confused, I suppose.

“It’ll be a while before we leave,” the white-haired man says. “The Camions still need to charge their batteries. As soon as they’re ready, we can leave anytime. And

you’re one of the people heading to Burkina Faso for the irrigation project?” he asks, looking at me challengingly. “Your colleagues are already here and waiting for you.”

“Merci bien, où sont-ils” I stammer, embarrassed.

“Turn your communicators back on,” Kasim says, pointing to his own. “Otherwise, I’ll get a headache.”

Two men and three women emerge from the large garage through a side door. They are talking animatedly and stride purposefully towards us.

"Which one of you is Mika?" an older woman asks, looking at us sternly.

"I'm Mika..." I reply. "Are you also part of the water supply project?"

"Yes, we are, but we were only expecting one young man," she says sharply. "Who is your companion?"

"This is my cousin Kasim; he was waiting for me here. We're going to visit our family together. There's a big family celebration planned, and I'm invited too," I explain, without really knowing why I'm doing it so eagerly.

The woman looks me up and down again, and then she noticeably relaxes.

"Aha, okay," she smiles at me kindly. "I'm Inga Romanow and I'm responsible for project logistics," she introduces herself briefly.

"We all read your profile on MultiNet, but I forgot that you also have roots in Burkina Faso," one of the men in the group interjects. "Where is your family from?"

"We're both from the Kaboré family in Koti," Kasim adds proudly. "And where are you from?"

I'm starting to feel like I'm at a table tennis match, everyone's talking so fast. The man from the project replies with a witty retort:

“I know your family, Kyara and Jitu Kaboré are friends of mine. We’re from the neighborhood, from Founzan. I’m Adama Sawadogo,” he smiles, extending his hand first to Kasim and then to me. “I’ve been working on this project for a while now, and there are also people from Koti involved. Do you want to join us?” he asks Kasim directly.

“No, no. I live and work here in Accra. I study botany and biology here on campus. I only want to go to Koti for the family celebration,” Kasim replies confidently. “The question is, though, whether I’ll be allowed to travel with your group… now that I’ve found my cousin and you’re going to take him away from me again…” he adds with a

chuckle to the woman.

"I don't know..." she says, looking at Kasim again with a deliberately sharp look this time.

Kasim plays along, pretending to be intimidated and desperate to make a good impression. I think he's funny. Finally, I hear the woman's voice again:

"OK, you can come along if you want. I'm Inga. Nice to meet you, Kasim."

She then turns to me and says:

"We're all on a first-name basis in the project. So, Mika, I'm Inga."

The two trucks are being driven out of the garage. One of the vehicles has been imaginatively converted into a bus, brightly painted and with curtains on the windows —windows that probably don't have panes of glass. The other vehicle is a flatbed truck with a trailer hitch, designed for transporting goods, but it's just as colorful, with brightly colored flags fluttering from every corner.

“We should divide ourselves among the vehicles now,” Inga says. “We can get to know each other better on the journey. We have a long trip ahead of us. We should hurry.”

“We’ll be there in plenty of time, and the barges won’t leave without us and the parts,” Adama tells her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Inga glances at him briefly, and I sense a certain tension between them. *›Interesting…‹* But I'm much more preoccupied with something else right now.

"Barges? What? I thought we were continuing our journey by truck and train!" I say, now completely bewildered. "I've just spent several weeks at sea and was expecting a journey on land..."

“Oh Mika, it’ll be fine,” one of the other women said kindly. “This time we’ll travel on the Volta River. There’s a very good waterway in the interior of the country that connects many lakes. This way we’ll get around much faster than using the very limited road network overland.”

The woman is looking at me very directly, but also very relaxed. She's probably not much older than me and has light blue eyes, which isn't very common in this region. I can't help it, but I find myself looking back at her for longer than I thought I would, and she doesn't look away.

“Aha…” I begin somewhat sheepishly, “I completely missed that during my

preparations… I mean, there's also a waterway through Ghana towards Burkina Faso," I add, to continue the conversation.

"Guys! Come on, we have to…" Adama's voice rings out from behind me.

As if on cue, we all start moving at once, and I bump into Kasim, who obviously wants to go in a different direction than the others. He mutters something unintelligible to himself, and we turn together toward the pier. Inga, Adama, and the two women, who, as I can now see more clearly, both seem to be about my age, are already trotting purposefully behind the slowly moving Camions. They've already reached the loaded trailer, and the drivers are currently maneuvering the truck in reverse. The cabins of both vehicles, especially that of the Camion converted into a bus, are reasonably spacious, and I hope that the seven of us will be able to fit in beside the driver. I really don't fancy riding on the cargo platform. A comfortable seat is definitely preferable.

"Adama, Hamidou, would you please ride in the transporter?" Inga asks in a tone that doesn't allow for any argument, and then adds, in our direction, "Mika, Kasim, you'll ride with Aidah, Ferouse and me in the bus, okay?"

"Well, that settles that..." I chuckle and nod with a wink at Kasim, who's already looking miserable. He comes very close and pushes me towards the bus.

"And you want to volunteer for this project...?" he whispers in my ear and nudges me lightly in the ribs with his elbow.

I see he's smiling to himself, but I don't want to dwell on it. The small bus has seats for each of us. We'll really have to snuggle up close, though, because the seats aren't very spacious. My communicator reports twenty-nine degrees Celsius in the shade. *›This is going to be very intimate, I'm afraid...‹*

"How long will it take to get to Sokpoe?" I ask casually before boarding the bus.

Kasim is already inside, on the back bench by the window. He probably knows what's coming. Aidah and Ferouse, *›Which one is which?‹*, are also getting on. The one who spoke to me is now sitting on the middle bench, the other one right next to Kasim, on the back bench. *›I guess I don't have a choice...‹* I tell myself, and I have to admit I'm kind of pleased. I tuck my backpack under the seat and ask again, as if it weren't already obvious:

"May I sit next to you?"

Our eyes meet again, and the young woman nods at me with the same casualness with which I asked my question. She immediately looks away afterward. *›Two strangers on a bus. This could get really interesting...‹* a thought trickles through my mind, and I immediately think of Ajola. I sit down. The bench seat is worn out, and the padding is nothing more than a fond memory. *›This bus isn't really suitable for long journeys...‹* I realize I'm quite distracted by the thought of Ajola. I haven't received any messages from her since Dakar, and I haven't sent any either. The last time I heard from her, she was doing well, and there was this guy, Raoul, who was always the subject of her messages. *›Was I... am I jealous?‹* I really have to ask myself that now, I know. Especially now that we're so far apart for an indefinite period.

Inga flops down in front of me onto the passenger seat, the backrest giving way slightly. Instinctively and surprisingly, I support her with both arms and knees.

“Oh, sorry, I should have said something…” the white-haired young man driving our bus says to me. “The bus isn’t exactly new,” he says, then turns to Inga, “and the seats sometimes give way if someone gets in too quickly…”

“Yes, yes, it’s alright… I’m not exactly young myself, you know,” Inga counters. “I can’t just hop into such an archaic vehicle so easily anymore…” she smiles at him. “Ferouse, have you contacted our people in Sokpoe yet?” she asks, without looking at anyone directly.

›Mist, wer ist jetzt wer von den beiden ...‹ Klingelt es kurz in meinem Kopf. Dann höre ich die Stimme neben mir antworten.

“Yes, of course. They are already waiting for us. Everything is prepared for the transshipment.”

›Ferouse... nice name, hehe...‹ I have to ask again, though. This time I address the driver directly and, just to be safe, I lightly touch his shoulder.

"How long is it to Sokpoe?"

"It's about eighty kilometers... that would be about an hour and a half's drive if everything goes well," the man replies. "So we should be able to make it by dinner," he adds, looking at Inga.

The transporter is already slowly moving towards the exit of the port facility. The fully loaded trailer seems to be traveling safely. The crates of components also look well secured; nothing is shifting on the loading platform. With a slight jolt, our bus also

begins to move. The electric motors hum quietly. I turn to my seatmate and look directly at her this time.

“Hello Ferouse, nice to meet you.”

“Yes, likewise, Mika,” she replies, looking back without a hint of embarrassment. “…I’m also from Koti, by the way, and I know your family there well,” she adds after a few moments. “My mother knows your mother too. They went to school together when they were children,” she explains, then looks back outside.

I suspect I must look somewhat surprised. It's a pleasant surprise, though. To hide my embarrassment, I stare intently through the windshield, the only window left in the bus. We're now turning right onto a simple but well-maintained country road.

On the Volta River

My shoulders feel constricted, and I try to turn over, but the mattress seems to move with me. *›Huh?...‹* I open my eyes, and the first thing I see is the bluish paint peeling off the wooden ceiling. I realize I'm not actually lying down, but... *›Ah...‹* I suddenly remember where I am. Apparently, I was in a very deep sleep and still thought I was in my bunk on the »Colombo«. *›I'm on another ship, on a river...‹* the memory trickles into my awareness, drop by drop. I hear the hum of the electric motors and feel the vibrations travel through the hull.

Kasim is hanging in another hammock to my left. *›Ha, we're really hanging together...‹* I smile to myself and awkwardly try to climb out of the hammock. The pressure in my lower abdomen is driving me to search for some relief. Standing, I can look outside. The boat is sailing calmly on the Volta.

"Did you sleep well?" asks Kasim, who is obviously already awake. "I'm waiting for you and I'm starving. Let's get something for breakfast."

"Yeah, I did... both," I reply, a little startled by the sound of my voice.

"What? Both?" he asks, puzzled.

"Well, I slept well and I'm hungry too. But I'm not really awake yet and I have to go somewhere..."

"You've got a point... where was the bathroom again?" asks Kasim.

"Are you asking me?" I reply, a little confused, and start pulling on my trousers.

Kasim looks at me questioningly. He's already dressed, I notice, and seems to be thinking hard.

"I think it's right here, the room directly opposite our cabin..." he says and disappears through the door.

›Man... he's in even more of a hurry than I am.‹ Through the cabin window, I watch the lush vegetation slowly drift by. Apart from the hum of the engines, there are only a few very muffled sounds, which must be coming from the ship's crew and our tour group. Kasim reappears in the doorway, his face radiating a joy that tells me he's finally found some peace. I put on my T-shirt and try to go outside.

"It was pretty exhausting yesterday getting everything loaded," he says casually from the doorway. "But I slept like a log. What's all that murmuring around us?"

"I'm guessing there are other people on the ship? Let's find out where breakfast is and what the others are doing, shall we? But first I need to…" I interject, quickly moving past him.

The bathroom is very small and sparsely furnished. I hadn't expected anything different. However, I'm very pleasantly surprised by the cleanliness. *›Why, actually? What did I expect? Why should it be any different here than anywhere else?‹* The thought itself surprises me too… I've read a lot about my mother's homeland and her family, especially about the original history and traditions of the people who lived and still live in this region of the world. Clearly, there was a distortion in the prevailing image of Africa that I hadn't been aware of before.

Feeling a bit more relaxed, I make sure my clothes are properly adjusted and head towards the murmuring. At the end of the corridor, in the direction of travel, I can see several figures through the open door. The breakfast table appears to be outside on deck. I reach the door and look out. The others from the project group are already sitting at the table, chatting, as I realize, in at least three different languages. I greet everyone and join them.

“Good morning…”, comes out of me, and I still notice that my voice is somewhat husky.

As if they had just noticed me, everyone present falls silent and looks in my direction, which instantly makes me very embarrassed. Inga is sitting right next to me. The silence lasts for a few more seconds before she speaks to me.

“Hi Mika, we thought you weren’t coming out of your hammock until noon today…”

she says, the irony in her voice unmistakable.

“Um…” I try to defend myself, though I’m not yet sure why I should.

“You might not realize it, but it’s pretty late, if I may say so…” she continues with a smirk.

“Huh…?” is the only coherent response I can manage.

The silence had become so thick that, if it weren't for the hum of the engines in the background, I could probably hear everyone breathing. Then they all burst into tremendous laughter.

"We're just teasing you, Mika!" Inga laughs at me. "Hey, it's okay. Just settle in. You'll find everything you need at the buffet," she then points towards another table along the outside wall of the cabin.

"We all just woke up," Adama, who's sitting opposite me, reassures me.

"Yes, thank you..." I reply, still a little unsure, and head towards the buffet.

I prepare a plate of fruit and a few pastries and pour myself a large mug of tea. Sitting back at the table, my gaze wanders over the passing landscape. On the port side of the shore, a settlement appears, seemingly abandoned and dilapidated. Even in Tema and on the way to Sokpoe, I noticed that there were very few people around. I'm hungry, and the fruit tastes delicious. I instinctively wonder which community prepared this buffet, as I'm still unclear about the cooperative structures in the region.

“Who knows which people brought us the buffet? Which community do they belong to?” I ask the group.

“As far as I know, the Sokpoe community runs the boat service. They also transport food and other necessities further north. Their people also provide the boat crew and probably organized our breakfast as well,” Adama replies.

“Do they regularly travel so far from their settlement, and only by water?” I continue, curious.

“Of course. All of our people love to travel. Our families are scattered far and wide. The waterway is the most important transport and travel route for this region. Besides, the old road network inland hasn't been maintained for quite some time. So, wherever possible, we use waterways, supplemented by short stretches of land. Don't you do that in Europe too?” Adama responds.

His question puts me on the spot a bit, especially Adama's decidedly irritated tone

surprises me, as if he expects me to justify myself. *›...So I'm not the only one who might have a distorted picture in my head?‹*

“The approach is the same for us,” I begin slowly. “But we live in communities that aren’t as far apart as they seem to me here. The population density in Europe, as far as I can tell, is definitely higher than here. Of course, we use rivers and lakes for transport. But the road and rail network also plays an important role in the exchange between communities,” I reply.

“Yes, you’ve noticed that correctly. In equatorial Africa, only about a quarter of the people live on a given land area compared to Europe. This presents greater challenges for the interaction between communities. But we have many times more wild areas here. Many of these areas haven’t been entered by humans for a long time and have remained untouched ever since,” Adama explains, continuing in the same vein. “I bet that’s not the case in Europe, is it? You can’t maintain large, contiguous areas of unspoiled nature there because so many people live there, right?”

I can feel myself getting a little annoyed.

“Yes, such areas have become quite normal in Europe too, at least since I was born,” I say dryly. “In the past, as I know from my father and grandfather, it was apparently very difficult in our region. But over time, and especially because fewer and fewer people consciously lived there, we managed to shape our way of life in such a way that human intervention could be reduced to a minimum. Now the various wilderness areas are increasingly merging into larger areas. In Europe, as presumably here as well, nature is now being left undisturbed.”

I realize my voice might sound a bit harsh. But I feel I need to clarify something here. I'm not used to these kinds of conversations, which often feel like a competition. I don't really understand what this is all about. I hope this resolves itself soon.

“That’s not entirely true,” Kasim says with a cheeky smile. “Neither here nor anywhere else. I know this for sure because I’m in contact with people all over the world due to my studies and research. We—and here I mean botanists and animal researchers worldwide—do indeed study the state of the forests and conduct animal counts. As part of my botany studies, for example, we’ve undertaken several expeditions into the wilderness in just the last eighteen months. But we adhere to the strict regulations and don’t interfere with the natural cycles.”

“Oh, right, I almost forgot about that. You regularly compile status reports and trig-

ger the MultiNet alarm bells if something isn't as expected," Inga adds.

Adama looks at me and Kasim in a slightly friendlier way and smiles.

"I think I'll have to discard some prejudices about Europe and revise my assessment," he says calmly.

"Yes, I feel the same way; I'm also currently reorganizing my worldview," I add. "I'm glad to have the opportunity to exchange experiences."

I never would have thought I'd have to explain the way people live in Europe here. But it makes sense. Just as I'm unfamiliar with the conditions here, people who have never been to Europe are equally unfamiliar with living conditions there. Clearly, rumors and distorted perceptions from bygone eras still influence people's thinking even today. I remember my great-grandfather writing something in his notes about the beginnings of the spread of what is now considered normal self-perception.

Breakfast is almost over and people are leaving the table. I'm the only one still sitting there. I could read a bit more while it's quiet and there's nothing else to do. A few clicks and the communicator quickly lists several entries that have been correlated under the term "shared equilibrium".

December 15, 2038

With relatively well-stocked pantries and plenty to eat every day, I'm finding wintertime quite pleasant this year. Noram and I have been back home in Walzbachtal since the day before yesterday.

It is the peace I find now that allows me to reflect on the wonder of synchronicity. I became interested in the study of religions early on, but I have never been a religious person. Therefore, during this winter season of reflection, I am generally not moved by traditional Christian rites, but rather by thoughts about the actual role of human beings in such a complex life context as that on our planet.

In recent months, in almost every community Noram and I visited, I found at least one person with whom I shared similar feelings. I was also able to discuss with many how to live in harmony with all other living beings on the planet, as equal living beings and links in the same cycle of life. At the same time, I was repeatedly astonished by the skepticism and sometimes even hostility with which some people

react when a perspective that focuses on more than just humanity is discussed. However, I find it important that, despite this latent hostility, it is evident that this topic is now being discussed all over the world. This discussion stands in direct contrast to the repeated attempts, sometimes violent, to suppress the necessary change and to continue living as people have done until now.

These radio conferences, which we are even participating in during these dark times in large, supra-regional groups, are an opportunity to discuss and exchange ideas with people from all over the world. We are slowly getting the feeling that communities like ours in Walzbachtal have established themselves virtually everywhere. While we don't know these people personally, we hear their voices and realize that what they say is very similar to what we feel. It's definitely not identical, but rather has its own local flavor and nuances, but the feeling is fundamentally the same.

It brings us back down to earth every time we realize that outside the small, self-sustaining communities springing up all over the world, the »many« deaths of people continue unabated. We can truly consider ourselves fortunate to have been given the chance to live in a community whose population has remained relatively stable so far.

At the same time—and this is what I mean by synchronicity—the realization of the shared life cycle of all living beings, in which humans can only be one equal link, is being reached by many individuals in many different places. The idea that humanity can no longer have special rights over other living beings is now, at least in my perception, what is being discussed at international radio meetings; it has become self-evident.

We also discuss this often, in small groups as well as in general meetings. This profound insight is being shared more and more frequently and quickly resonates with most members.

The emerging question of how we humans can live in a way that doesn't abuse, disturb, or displace other living beings is being explored, and answers are being sought that also take local conditions

into account. I find it very interesting and compelling that communities on the outskirts of cities, compared to communities in rural areas, are finding differently weighted answers to this question, all of which could, however, be valid.

I think that we—and by that I mean all of us, all people—are finally on a good path of further development. My family and I, my friends, we're all right in the middle of this transformation… and soon it will be the winter solstice, perhaps this time also a symbol of a new beginning for humanity?

March 29, 2040

Adina still isn't quite coming to terms with the fact that Noram has stayed in Casablanca. I can understand that, as a mother, she can't easily let go of her child, who will soon be twenty-nine. But Noram has hardly been home in recent years anyway. Yes, well, he's been around now and then, and now she hasn't seen him for almost six months, and then she learns that he's staying away indefinitely because he's met a woman and fallen in love with her… I have to chuckle when I think that Adina and I have often wondered whether Noram even intended to be with anyone… We also often thought about grandchildren when we were looking after the little ones in our community. But now it's obviously happening. At least we now have a lovely photo of Noram with his Rachida, his sweetheart, as he so bluntly calls her. There was definitely a spark when the two of them met in Casablanca. I've never seen Noram so enchanted. After that, he only had eyes for Rachida! Luckily, I think, it was all over for her because of him too. I believe they were together constantly from that moment on. He only came to our room to change his clothes or leave something, certainly not at night anymore.

I'm certainly glad he seems happy. Adina will calm down, because he'll surely come home with Rachida at some point. I understand perfectly well that Rachida doesn't want to leave with Noram right away, because of her very sick mother. The small community where Rachida and her mother live will certainly benefit from Noram's sup-

port.

During the three weeks I spent alone returning to Walzbachtal, I had plenty of time to organize my thoughts. I was deeply moved by the way people interacted during the global in-person meeting and feel called to contribute, at least in some small way, to disseminating the insights we gained together. The principles formulated at the conference must be made known to as many people as possible. They must be translated into many languages and distributed electronically and perhaps also in print, depending on the resources available in specific regions and communities.

I believe it is crucial that the principle of the primacy of shared equilibrium is now considered and discussed at all levels—local, regional, and interregional. I can contribute to the new online forums, answer questions from my perspective, and share my own insights. All of this will undoubtedly encourage others to at least reflect on the issue and perhaps re-examine their own lifestyles.

Here too, with us, there is much to be done. A consensus has been reached that the principles and techniques of permaculture must now be predominantly used if we are to live in harmony with all beings. Traditional agricultural practices, especially those in Europe and North America, must be questioned and, where possible, consistently abandoned. There will be some people, even in our community, who will not readily agree to this approach. And we are already quite far along, as we are already largely practicing permaculture. But it is also about animal husbandry and meat consumption itself. Animal husbandry and hunting can only continue to a very limited extent if the common equilibrium of all life is to be preserved. It is already evident that these activities are steadily declining in all regions of the world, albeit in very different ways. This is normal. We humans must find ways to integrate ourselves into the life cycle in such a way that we can eat a balanced diet without doing so solely at the expense of other beings. In the life cycle, the death of one being helps the life of another. However, in the past, we humans largely avoided

our own death for the benefit of other beings, but instead killed other beings en masse for our own benefit.

This goes hand in hand with the realization that the number of people who can live on this planet is a crucial factor in maintaining the balance of all life. I can help ensure that this topic is given even greater prominence in discussions about the necessary changes in people's lifestyles and thus becomes an even more integral part of daily life.

April 25, 2048

I still can't quite believe it, even though I now understand that life isn't about belief, but about recognition. Thirty years ago, I wished for a miracle to happen and for us to have the opportunity to live in a more beautiful and better world. Today, I can see how this miracle is practically unfolding right now.

What a turbulent time has passed since then. During my studies, the average attitude of my colleagues was one of cold-hearted ignorance towards all other living beings on our planet. In Noram's generation, this perspective is considered unthinkable today.

I should be happy about it, but somehow I'm not quite managing it yet. I have to admit that I'm still plagued by anxieties about whether this change, which I also support, is truly sustainable, indeed, whether it will last...

It seems that today the majority of people across the planet recognize that all beings, including humans, form a single life cycle and live in a shared equilibrium that must be respected if all beings, including humans, are to survive. We have already agreed on global conventions that, with very few exceptions, everyone in the world adheres to. We have stopped seeing ourselves as something special and granting ourselves rights that we shouldn't actually have. We even no longer speak of »nature,« as we finally recognize that there can be no separation between the human and the non-human.

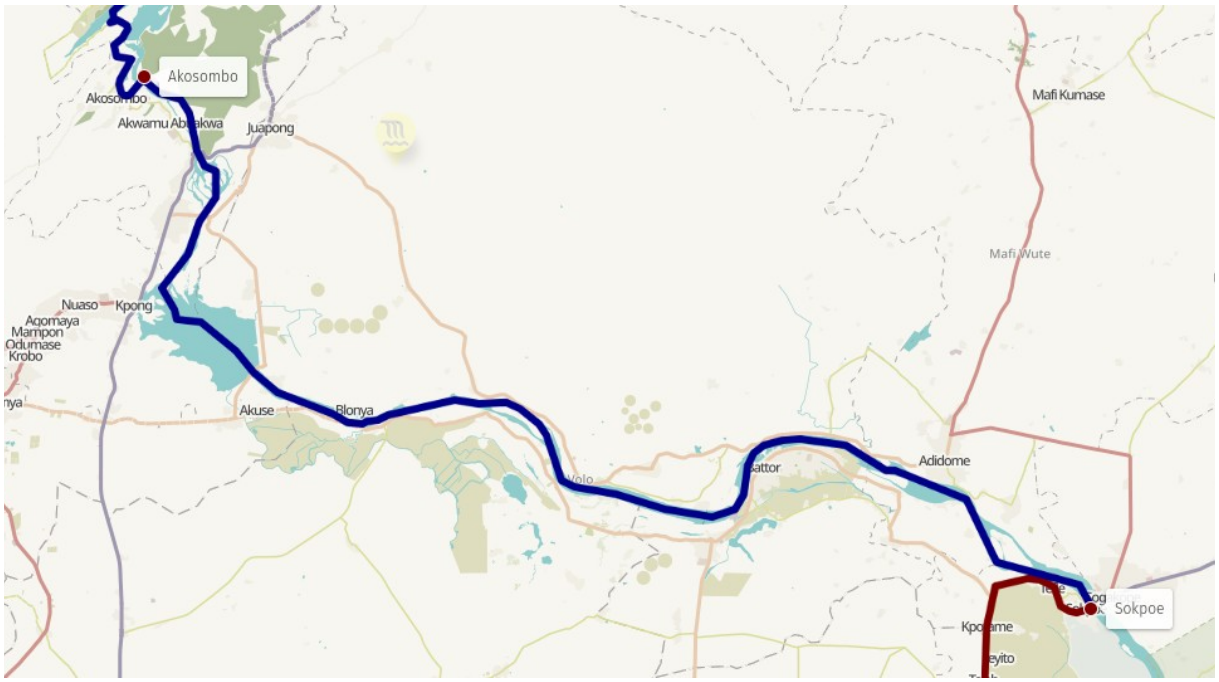
The effects are now visible all over the planet. Roads and other hu-

man transport routes are being partially dismantled to avoid further fragmenting animal habitats. Major cities are gradually being completely deserted, deliberately left to decay, and intentionally returned to »wild« life. Communities are finally learning to live in harmony with the local environment and with respect and consideration for all other living beings.

Humanity has been decimated in the last decade through its own mistakes. Many people have needlessly and unwillingly lost their lives in disasters of all kinds: floods and droughts, wars and violent social unrest. None of this would have been necessary if people had recognized themselves earlier within the context of all life. But they couldn't do that then, and not everyone can even do it today.

We have now reached a new beginning in the history of human evolution. We have finally recognized the difference between revolution and evolution and have opted for evolutionary development. However, this new way of life is still very fragile… there is definitely still much to be done for many generations to come… Noram and Rachida are now closer to this point, and perhaps later Simon will also be the one who champions it… I certainly hope so…

›If you had only known, dear Ethan...‹ I think, putting the communicator back in my pocket. I do believe Ethan would have been overjoyed to see us humans today. Everything that was once a wish of my great-grandfather's now seems perfectly normal. Without his notebooks, I couldn't even imagine that long before my time, humanity lived in such a self-destructive way. And yet, without the efforts of the survivors of that era, our lives today would not be possible. I know that my great-grandfather wasn't a particularly important person. But he is for me now, because he gives me a unique insight into the development of my world today. I am quite proud of my great-grandfather, I realize. Even though, and I am very aware of this, almost all the remaining humans at that time had to be pioneers of a new way of life. There were so few left that every single human being mattered.



Sokpoe - Akosombo-Staudamm

Changeover at the Akosombo Dam

Ahead of us, the Volta Dam comes into view. The dam crest, six hundred meters long and one hundred and thirty meters high, lies like a giant barrier across the landscape. The condition of the structure shows that the surrounding communities are investing considerable effort in maintaining it while simultaneously integrating it into the landscape in such a way that it does not pose an obstacle for aquatic life.

On the eastern side of the dam, I see a series of cascades winding down the steep slope almost like a natural stream to the lower reaches of the watercourse. The banks of the cascade are now so well and completely covered with vegetation that it's only in a few places clearly recognizable as an artificial waterway. I'm impressed.

Our boat slowly docks at the western landing stage, right in front of the dam. Trucks are waiting on the bank, ready to be loaded with all sorts of things, just like in Tema. I help where I can, although there isn't much for a novice like me to do. There are plenty of people there to take care of it, and they're clearly very efficient.

I've been wondering all along why this dam is still there and why the hydroelectric power plant is still in operation. From my studies, I know that maintaining such facilities is very complex and resource-intensive. I don't want to ask any questions right now, as everyone I could ask is very busy. My search on MultiNet only yields limited

information about the background of dam construction. In Ethan's notes, my search query only finds one entry that seems to describe the topic of energy generation in a somewhat broader context.

September 10, 2033

I'm still in shock, I think. Everything around me seems to have stopped. I've heard a lot about the increasing brutality in people's interactions. Everyone who goes into town fairly regularly talks about it in the neighborhood. But today it's come to us. Just a few streets away, I saw the lifeless body of a man this morning. A pool of dried blood lay around his head, which had been crushed by something heavy. I was alone on the street, and I have to admit I was afraid to go near him. I did it anyway and even managed to touch him. No pulse in his carotid artery. No breath. He was truly dead. There was a small potato under his left shoulder… I took it with me and then looked for help… Help for what? To bury the man, what else? I couldn't find the police, and the man had been dead for several hours. So I knocked on Volker's door. His mother had only recently passed away, and he had buried her himself. He needed to know what to do and how to do it. And he did. Harald and I helped him. Since then, I just haven't been able to truly get back to myself. I'm afraid this might only be the beginning.

Adina and Noram are also very upset. Arthur is acting as if none of this concerns him. I don't think he's handling it very well. He's doing quite poorly, and news like this doesn't make it any better. I wonder how much longer he can go on living like this. Unfortunately, we have very little... too little food, and he's getting weaker and weaker.

Noram was listening on his satellite phone again and brought back more bad news today. It says that most of the world's nuclear power plants, coal-fired power stations, and hydroelectric plants have been out of operation for quite some time. There are simply hardly any specialists left who could maintain and operate them. This isn't really relevant to us anymore. A few nights ago, he managed to bring home a solar panel that he'd somehow detached from a field installa-

tion and is now trying to connect it to our system. I was very surprised that he managed to do it without damaging it. Solar panels are highly sought after, and carrying them around can be quite dangerous. Not because of the police—there are hardly any of them anymore. At least not in our area. The other people out and about looking for such things can become very unpleasant if they feel threatened or if their own interests are at risk.

Volker had a man visit him today who told him that industrial production has collapsed across the country and many factories have been destroyed. Only a few select factories are still operated by the army and protected by armed force. He also said that these factories are now being kept running through forced labor. He claimed that people are increasingly being forced to work at gunpoint in the streets. We can't verify this here, though. We haven't had any such cases here yet, thankfully… but we still want to be very cautious…

Indeed, what Ethan described has less to do with energy production and more to do with how people interacted during that time of crisis. I've read several accounts of it so far, and I've noticed that I'm internally resisting it. It makes me uncomfortable, and I don't really want to know anything more about it. But I still want to read Ethan's descriptions. It's both disturbing and relieving when I realize that the world Ethan described has nothing to do with the world I live in…

I have to shake myself briefly to shake off the unpleasantness. I let my eyes wander along the shore. I refocus on the dam. *›Is there any other production facility here that would justify maintaining this waterworks?‹* I wonder, as I gaze at the gigantic structure. From Adama's and Kasim's explanations, I gathered that in this region, maintaining the equilibrium of all living beings is of paramount importance, and that the people here are very proud of it.

Everything has been loaded by now, and everyone who wants to continue their journey is finding a spot on the trucks. I deliberately climb onto the truck platform next to Adama and Inga, where the panels for the project are stacked. Everyone is quite quiet. No one says a word. We're not sitting particularly comfortably, but that's not so important for such a short trip. I hear the truck's electric motor humming deeply, and we slowly start moving. Adama is sitting with his back to me. Never mind, I ask any-

way.

"Um..." I begin uncertainly, having to hold on tight as the driver swerves to avoid a pothole with a distinct jerk. "Adama?" I try again.

Adama doesn't really notice me. He's looking up at the top of the dam and seems lost in thought. I place my hand on his shoulder.

„Adama?“

He flinches slightly and turns towards me.

"Mika? Did you say something?" he asks, surprised but also smiling. "Something's been on my mind, and I'm not really here..." he continues smiling at me.

"Yes..." I start again, "I'd like to ask a few questions, and I'm hoping you can answer them reasonably well. Would that be alright?"

"Sure, of course. What's bothering you, young man?" Adama turns completely to me and beams at me with shining eyes.

"It's about the hydroelectric power plant here. Is it still operating? I mean, is it still producing electricity?" I ask quickly, without pausing for breath.

Adama looks at me with a mixture of surprise and appreciation, then looks up at the dam crest again, as he had done before my question.

“So,” he begins after a few seconds, “this is quite a coincidence, isn’t it? I was just thinking about that myself. Those were exactly the thoughts I was lost in when I felt your hand on my shoulder…”

“Really? Why’s that?”

“A good question, isn’t it? You probably think there can’t be any secrets for me here in this region. Surprise!” Adama smiles at me again. “I know quite a bit, but definitely not everything. And I was actually just wondering if the dam’s waterworks were still operating, because, as you probably know, it’s not exactly easy to run a power plant like that these days.”

“That’s crazy, really,” I marvel. “I can imagine that maintaining the dam itself is important, because the dam ensures that the Volta Reservoir even exists. It makes sense that the dam is integrated into the current landscape and is also preserved.”

“Yes, exactly, that’s what I’m saying, Mika,” Adama replies. “And in this context, you’re wondering what’s happening with the hydroelectric power plant, correct?”

“Exactly. I would have expected it to be shut down already. But it looks like the hy-

droelectric power plant is still operating, doesn't it? I mean, everything's clean, electrical cables are running out on well-maintained pylons…"

"I agree, Mika, and I'm afraid we both need to ask someone who's actually from here, from Akosombo. Luckily, there's one sitting up front. Wait a minute…" Adama says.

He briefly stands up and weaves his way to the front of the platform, where a white-haired man stands with his back to us, looking forward. The trucks struggle up the steep road, and after a short drive, we reach the highest point and can see the larger port complex above the Volta Dam. Adama speaks to the man. I can't really understand anything, as everything is in a local dialect, and the sounds of the drive sometimes drown out the voices. The man looks at me, smiles, and then comes with Adama. They both sit down on the truck's flat in front of me, and the man extends his hand.

"Hello, I'm Sami," he says kindly. "I hear you, do you have any questions about the hydroelectric power plant here at the Volta Dam?"

"Yes, exactly," I reply, somewhat surprised that my communicator was able to translate everything as well as it had with Adama. "I'm Mika and I'm here in the area for the first time. I come from Europe and I'm delighted by how beautiful it is. That's why I asked about the hydroelectric power plant. I didn't expect it to still be operating. How come?"

Sami listens attentively to the translation from my communicator, his gaze growing ever more interested. I suspect this must be due to my European background. It seems this will be a recurring theme here. While I may look like the locals, I wasn't born here and this is my first time in this region. That's bound to pique their curiosity. Adama adds a few things in the local dialect that I don't understand.

"Mika from Europe," Sami says, smiling at me curiously. "Nice to meet you, Mika! It's rare for us to have people from Europe here, and even rarer someone like you, who, as I just learned from Adama, even has family roots here. Yes, I can answer your questions. I've worked at the hydroelectric power plant my entire career. I'm one of the electrical engineers who try to keep the plant running with very limited resources." He glances briefly at the top of the dam, and it's clear that he's moved to be able to talk about it. "It's actually quite simple," he begins. "Originally, the hydroelectric power plant was built with four turbines and later expanded to six, as it was

intended to supply the entire region. After the Transformation time, a few people with some expertise tried to keep the plant running as best they could. Since very few of us remained here, and still do, it was no longer necessary to operate all six turbines. The logical conclusion was immediately to keep only one turbine in regular operation and use the other five as a source of spare parts. This has worked well to this day, as you can see for yourself. The power plant delivers an average of one hundred megawatts, thus adequately covering the needs of the surrounding region. We also have several workshops here for ship repairs and maintenance, which can also be powered by this system. Therefore, the impact of the hydroelectric power plant extends to the entire Lake Volta."

Sami abruptly ends his presentation and looks at me with warm eyes. I need a moment to think. He just told me a lot, very quickly and concisely. Everything makes sense from my inexperienced perspective, but I wouldn't know what to say now.

"Is everything clear? Do you have any further questions?" Sami asks patiently.

"No, thank you, the answer makes perfect sense to me..." I stammer, trying to collect my thoughts. "You told me so much in such a short time that I need to sort everything out first," I attempt to explain. "If I may say so," I begin again, returning Sami's smile, "your answer was very efficiently formulated."

“Yes, that could be,” Sami says with a smile. “It’s probably a consequence of the very limited resources we have here. They greatly influence our behavior,” he adds with a wink. “We have to make sure we work quickly and efficiently!”

Adama seems satisfied with the answer. His attention is currently focused on the arrival of the trucks at the upper harbor. With a jolt, we stop at the pier. There, we load another boat of a similar size to the previous one, and we're all back on board relatively quickly. Sami waves to us from the pier as we cast off and continue our journey. If I understood Inga and Adama's conversation correctly, our next stop should be Kpandu.

Akosombo - Kpandu

Shore Leave in Kpandu

Ahead of us, the outlines of a settlement are visible. A long jetty juts out into Lake Volta, and our boat is heading straight for it. Everyone seems to be looking forward to the stopover and is standing curiously at the railing.

“We’ll replenish our food and water supplies here,” Ferouse tells Aidah. “The two boatmen asked me to make sure everyone pitches in.”

“Yes, we also have cargo for the community in Kpandu… that needs to be unloaded first,” Aidah replies.

“Hey, Mika, Kasim, please lend a hand,” Aidah urges us.

“Yes, you guys are a good bunch of lads who can work hard, you’ve already shown that,” Ferouse says, looking me up and down.

I glance back cheekily, because the last time she addressed me directly, I still have a slightly uncomfortable memory. I mean, I notice that I get a little embarrassed in her presence, and I don't particularly like that. I'm not looking at her as intently as she just did, but I can tell that the message I'm sending is getting through. Ferouse's gaze softens, and for a while she looks at me with a look that is simultaneously relaxed, meaningful, and smiling. Finally, she firmly takes my hand and, laughing, leads me along behind her.

“Um, Mika? This pallet will be the first one off the ship,” she says, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, pointing to a heavily loaded and securely tied pallet. “The pallet jack is right here.”

Aidah and Kasim have followed us and are working on the second pallet. I wonder if Kasim is experiencing the same thing as me. He definitely seems to be enjoying the situation too.

The boat comes to a gentle stop and is moored at the landing stage by our boatman. The loading ramp is lowered smoothly, clearing the way ashore. Several people are already there, waving and greeting us cheerfully.

“Come on Mika, get out load number one,” Ferouse continues to cheer me on with a smile.

I glance back, slightly annoyed. I really don't like being bossed around, even jokingly. *›Whatever...‹* I think, and am quite surprised to see the pallet jack, which I'd already pushed under the pallet, lift the pallet off the ground without any further input from me. Once the load is on top, the pallet jack starts moving with a jerk. *›I wouldn't have thought this old, rusty piece of equipment had such automatic features.‹*

I carefully steer the truck up the ramp and have one of the people standing on land show me a parking spot. Behind me, Kasim comes up the ramp with the other pallet truck, but he seems to have to exert more force and pushes the load ahead of him, puffing and panting.

"Why are you sweating so much?" I ask, surprised. "My pallet jack doesn't look like this, but it's equipped with an automatic mechanism. What about yours?"

"Nothing like that, they both seem to be identical, but either this one lacks the automatic mechanism or it's broken," Kasim replies, pointing at the machine. "I'm lucky this pallet is only half as full as yours."

I hear peals of laughter beside me. The two girls are watching us and joking about Kasim's and my strength and masculinity. I notice Kasim blushing, and I'm not feeling much better myself. *›Those two are really cheeky!...‹*

“You two are really strong heroes,” Ferouse says, smiling at me with her beautiful white teeth. “Come with us, we want to look around Kpandu a bit. Our boat won’t leave for at least another hour.”

I pretend I didn't hear anything and maneuver the pallet jack back and forth to lower the pallet to the ground. Still hidden behind the pallet, I risk a glance. She seems to have been expecting it. *›... or perhaps it was my wish?‹* Because she's looking me straight in the eye again. And I like what I see...

“Yes, yes, Ferouse, we’ll come along, of course…” I say, grabbing Kasim by the shoulders. “Come on, Kasim!”

We walk side by side from the boat dock along the wide street towards the town center. The street is lined with a few single-story houses and many green trees. I see some people gathered in a small square.

“Are they having a team meeting?” I ask Ferouse curiously. “It sounds like they’re assigning tasks, right?”

“Yes, that’s right,” she replies. “Good observation!”

She smiles again, nudges me with her shoulder, grabs my hand and pulls me along behind her.

“Let’s take a look around the community center. There’s usually some information for visitors there.”

I don't pull my hand away, but gently but firmly encircle hers. We walk purposefully toward one of the buildings on the other side of the village square. I glance sideways at her and let her lead the way. She looks back, relaxed, her eyes sparkling. *›What am I doing here?‹* I wonder. It feels incredibly exciting to be so close to her. She's clearly a strong personality, used to taking what she wants. I've never met anyone so bold. To a certain extent, I like it. *›Let's see who realizes first when it's too much...‹*

“Look, there are two caves here. Shall we visit one?” Aidah suggests, holding up a map with some text.

“I think they’re too far away to reach on foot and still get back to the boat in time,” Kasim replies.

“This warning is interesting: »The elephants and hippos that occasionally appear here must be left undisturbed, as a disturbed animal can pose an immediate danger to life«,” I read aloud. “There’s also a warning about crocodiles in Lake Volta…”

“We should head back slowly before the elephants come!”, Ferouse mimes a panic attack and laughs gleefully.

Her laughter is contagious, and amidst laughter and elephant trumpet sounds, we head back out onto the street. The assembled crowd watches us and waves amusedly. Kasim suddenly points to the group of trees next to us and gives me a nudge.

"What kind of animals are those? Are they monkeys?" I ask him.

"Well, Mika, nature is especially close to us here," he says, "Those are vervet

monkeys, I think about twenty individuals, playfully frolicking around."

Suddenly all the monkeys are silent and stare intently at us. After a few seconds, with a whoosh, they all disappear at once. Obviously, they don't like being stared at so brazenly by a group of people.

“I once read on MultiNet that there used to be zoos where people kept animals captive. I can't even imagine how animals were displayed in cages…” I remember thinking aloud.

“Yes, I can't imagine it either,” Ferouse replies, seeming to become thoughtful herself. “These days, when we grow food, we take into account that the animals can also help themselves in our permaculture gardens. Although most of them prefer to stay away from human settlements altogether. That way, no tension arises between animals and humans,” she concludes, as if she were giving a lecture.

“You know about this?” I hear Kasim's voice. “I mean, regarding the connection between food production and the behavior of animals in the respective environment?” he asks more precisely, looking at Ferouse with great interest.

“Yes, a little,” she says, still lost in thought. “I’ve been studying this topic for some time now, also in the context of the irrigation project. Where there is water, plants and animals return, and a fascinating coexistence develops between humans and all other living beings, which we humans, in particular, must carefully maintain in balance. Unfortunately, this wasn’t common practice in the past, and there’s a lot we—I mean our generation—have to keep relearning in this regard.”

›My great-grandfather mentioned a few things in his notebook about how things used to be...‹ I think. There's a lot of information on MultiNet, but it can't have the personal touch of someone who actually experienced it all firsthand.

“In our research, the question often arises as to how the impact of humans on other life forms can be effectively avoided…” Kasim begins again. “And it all always has to do with food production. We have often observed that humans and animals only develop competitive behavior where space is too limited. By that, I mean when humans claim so much space for themselves that other life forms can no longer move freely and carry out their natural way of life,” he continues, seemingly very absorbed by the topic.

Ferouse turns to him and her voice sounds very serious.

"Yes, that's my experience too. We humans are still the ones causing the problem,

and therefore we should also be the ones who have to come up with a solution."

My head is spinning a bit because I don't quite understand what they all mean. We have animals at home too, but our gardens aren't overrun by them. Yes, okay, there aren't any monkeys, but we do have wild boars, wolves, wild goats, and sheep… I just don't get it.

"What's the problem here?" I hear me asking the two of them.

Ferouse and Karim, who are currently very busy giving each other the silent treatment, turn to me in surprise.

"Excuse me?" Kasim asked. "What problem should it be?"

"I think I know what Mika means," Ferouse interjects, nodding in my direction. "You want to know why I'm talking about humanity's responsibility for the balance of life, when that should really go without saying, right?"

Ferouse's assumption surprises me. She's right, that's precisely what I don't realize. However, I have no chance to reply, because she continues speaking without interruption.

"After the Transformation, people in this region were particularly convinced of the conveniences of technological progress in terms of comfort and consumption. It has taken a surprisingly long time, and we are still not overcoming the fact that some people still view their environment as their property and consider themselves superior to other ways of life. Yes, we have a different way of life today and different methods of obtaining our food. However, the understanding that humankind is not meant to take from the natural world, but rather is responsible for protecting this realm from ourselves and preserving it for all life forms, is not universally and equally internalized by every community."

I'm aware that I'm listening to her intently, but I can't help it. I have to admit to myself that I'm not sure whether I find the topic itself, or perhaps Ferouse, so interesting.

“This naturally includes the way we design and maintain our permaculture gardens here… and how much we still encroach on the spaces of the plant and animal world,” Ferouse continues. “Especially in the Sahel fringe areas, where life is just beginning to re-establish itself, the relationship between humans and all other living beings is still strained, and there are still many issues that need to be addressed before things can ease,” she adds, before a short alarm interrupts the conversation.

She looks at her communicator and announces dryly.

"We have to go back. Our boat is leaving soon."

On deck, I find a quiet spot and sit down. I quench my thirst with fresh fruit juice. I realize that Ferouse's words have deeply moved me, not only because of the content, but more so because of the tone she used. I had the feeling the whole time that she knew exactly what she was talking about, and that this was conveyed not just through her words, but even more so through her entire demeanor.

I suddenly feel curious to see if I can find something similar in Ethan's notes. I know, having skimmed through some of them before, that Ethan had also written about it. I configure a new query and send it. While the communicator works, I watch the green shore of the lake glide past the boat. I can still picture Ferouse's face in my mind's eye when she spoke earlier about the erratic behavior of people. A beep signals that the results of my search query have been listed.

April 26, 2022

I keep asking myself why it's so normal for us humans to presume the right to decide over the lives of other beings? We've had over sixty years of militant animal rights activism, and a growing global community of vegetarians and vegans is emerging. Hardly a month goes by without some kind of protest action drawing attention to the appalling conditions in factory farming. And yet, nothing changes. The majority of people still find it perfectly normal, even self-evident, that we keep animals, birds, fish, and other creatures captive and ultimately kill them for our own benefit, for our »pleasure«" and for our food.

I wonder if things will ever be different… if humanity will ever, and what a miracle that would be, stop placing itself at the center of all being on this planet. There are so many people who already feel differently, and yet, there are still far too few to truly change anything. It seems as if the majority of people simply cannot see what is so clear to the few…

What is needed here? What can bring about this profound change? What do people need to recognize the obvious?

Especially now, with yet another war being started (and I don't care who started it or why), a war that will once again destroy countless lives, I wish we humans would finally learn and recognize that our conflicts not only harm ourselves but also countless other living beings. It doesn't matter if we are Russian, Ukrainian, American, German, and so on; we are all human beings and therefore equal as human beings. Daniele Ganser speaks repeatedly, and I believe rightly so, of the "human family" to which all humans implicitly belong. I would change this name to "family of living beings," because the Earth is not only home to humans but to many other living beings, all of whom must be respected if we humans are to survive as a species.

August 9, 2022

I'm currently reading that the implementation of the Great Green Wall project in Africa, which began 13 years ago, has stalled. Particularly in Burkina Faso, the disastrous political and economic situation has brought progress to a standstill. The idea of positively influencing desertification and the climate with a 7,000 km long and 15 km wide strip of forest will certainly not be completed by 2030… Especially not if the financing, which depends primarily on Western states, is weighed against military aid for the war in Ukraine.

Zanga explained that in recent years, only very limited attempts have been made in Burkina Faso to establish any plantings at all on the edge of the Sahel. These plantings require a lot of water, which can only be provided with considerable financial resources. According to Zanga, parts of the newly planted areas are already withering due to the ongoing drought. As far as I can see, there isn't really any interest here in Europe in pursuing this issue constructively. What's currently occupying Germans far more is the €9 ticket that has just been introduced and is causing massive overcrowding on local trains. The priorities of the »well fed« are clearly very different from those of the »hungry«.

Will this fundamentally very valuable plan to encircle Africa with a

Green Belt ever become a reality? Adina keeps nagging me for developing such negative thoughts instead of »investing in hope«, as she always says… She's right, but I can't help it: What I read and what Zanga tells me isn't exactly encouraging… The few people around us who are even aware of these issues and with whom we can discuss them also have very different views on what the solutions might look like… How are we supposed to communicate if we don't even start from the same basis of perceiving?

Yes, of course, Adina keeps talking about the »dialogical attitude« that we humans need to develop in order to be able to communicate with each other at all... yes, all well and good, but the reality on the street and especially in the circles of »decision-makers« that affect us all is unfortunately different... there isn't even a hint of a »dialogical attitude« there.

February 25, 2039

The realization that humanity must organize a completely new way of life if the species is to survive on this planet continues to spread around the world via radio. New radio stations are now emerging, not only here in Germany, but also in many other regions, countries, and even continents. I have listened to programs that described the insights we have gained, albeit in different words, but essentially with the same feelings and perceptions. Initially, I mistakenly thought that this had only spread within our local network.

I specifically addressed this at one of the recent international radio meetings. I learned that the same realization had been reached in other parts of the world, such as Africa, the former territories of China, India, Brazil, and even in the US. While currently only a few people are willing to discuss these topics, all of them, despite the considerable distances and cultural differences, have arrived at a remarkably similar understanding of how and why people's lives should be shaped differently.

Many also observe that, in their immediate surroundings, very few

people disagree with this new perspective. Most of those they are in contact with agree that a shared, relative, and very delicate equilibrium exists among all living beings. Many believe that global principles are needed to govern the way human life is organized on this planet, so that this equilibrium is not further disrupted.

Considerations from different parts of the planet were presented on how the common principles must be designed so that they can make the common goal achievable while simultaneously promoting and allowing a local way of life.

It's simply fascinating how quickly such an evolutionary vision can spread. Many suspect that the massive reduction in the human population is what made this vision possible in the first place. The latest rough estimates suggest that very likely only a third of humanity survived. The birth rate is currently much lower than the death rate, so the global population is expected to shrink even further.

In other words, since significantly fewer people now live on the planet, the percentage of those who can imagine a way of life that would respect the shared equilibrium of all life has increased, and this perception carries more weight. It pains me to think that what would allow for a life in harmony with all beings was only made possible by the death of so many people. It seems, however, that this must be an implicit systemic mechanism that, by and large, ensures the self-preservation of the shared equilibrium. I feel small and insignificant when I consider myself in this context. But also grateful that I get to experience this at all…

I hope things will get better for all of us over time. Noram and his colleagues are clearly making great strides in internet and digital communication. This will soon give us the opportunity for everyone to communicate with everyone else, everywhere. I'm really curious to see how and when that will work again.

It is crucial for this development that the respective local approaches and solutions are presented everywhere as equally valid very quickly. Only in this way will these different approaches become

known and ultimately be able to mutually enrich each other. It is very important that this process is consciously based on equality, cooperation, and solidarity, and takes place in mutual respect and appreciation of all life.

Yes, that's precisely what amazes me about Ferouse. Several generations have passed between her and Ethan. It seems that what Ethan and the Pioneers of Transformation brought into the world back then as vision and knowledge has reached Ferouse unchanged. The fact that a connection develops between so many people who don't know each other personally, across decades and continents, can only be interpreted as an indication of the interconnectedness that is considered normal in our time. And I've known this interconnectedness since my childhood. But with Ferouse, I experience this normality as a different quality of inner being. Ferouse embodies an attitude that is clearly an instinctive and intuitive part of her life. She speaks about interconnectedness not because she has learned and accepted it, as so many people in Europe still do, but because she feels it inwardly. At least, that's how I feel when I experience her. This increasingly amazes me.

Kpandu - Kete Krachi

On the Way to Kete Krachi

Preparations for the onward journey are still ongoing. Inga and Adama seem to have some things to sort out before they can depart. They are definitely not on board yet.

It's still quiet here where I'm sitting. I'm using the time to do some more reading. The conversation with Kasim and Ferouse continues to occupy my thoughts. I realize that many questions are arising within me, seeking answers. I'm particularly interested in what the general attitude of people was during Ethan's time. It's a completely unfamiliar world to me, the world of that era, and in many aspects, it remains

difficult for me to comprehend. I want to know more about the details of different periods during the Transformation. He wrote a great deal about it.

October 3, 2033

Today is German Unity Day. The significance of this date in our time is highly telling. People are fighting each other, their neighbors, for food and fuel. Individual freedom of movement is severely restricted throughout the region. Checkpoints have been set up at many intersections in the city and surrounding areas, some more or rather less official than others – in other words, manned by highwaymen. These checkpoints are increasingly monitored by the military, private security forces, or armed gangs. Noram and I haven't seen police officers acting like actual officers in a long time.

It seems that the state itself and its organizations, such as the police and courts, are now on the verge of complete collapse. Not that we have benefited much from it in recent years. »Law and order« are now only ensured locally and are dictated by the wishes of the respective, self-appointed »elite«. The era of private armies has arrived. Ordinary people are practically left to fend for themselves and face the threat of forced labor for the local power brokers.

Noram returned yesterday from an »expedition« in the city, very upset. He told us about dead bodies lying in the streets—not just one, but many—simply rotting there because no one was burying them. Even the security forces nearby weren't doing anything about it. He kept a low profile and tried not to be seen or caught. He was also looking for medicine. Adina has a cold, and her chest sounds awful. She probably needs antibiotics. Noram did manage to get hold of some medical supplies at a school, but no antibiotics. However, getting away then became a problem for him. As he was leaving the building, he was ambushed by a group armed with sticks and baseball bats and had to run for his life. I'm glad he made it home safe and sound.

After he had managed to shake off his pursuers and was about to go

home, Noram had observed something else worrying. A few kilometers away, he saw armored vehicles and trucks turning onto a road. Armed men in uniform got out of the vehicles and went from house to house. They took some people out and loaded them into the trucks. He said this immediately reminded him of the persistent rumors about forced labor.

If that's true, then it also means we're no longer safe here in the suburbs. And it also means we have to find a way to leave this unsafe environment. But how and where? Especially since many routes are now occupied and constantly monitored.

There are already a few places we could go to in the area surrounding Frankfurt, but this region seems too densely populated… We've received some information from our neighbors that small self-sufficient communities springing up just outside the cities are very often threatened and exploited by both gangs and the self-appointed »police« of those cities. Someone had shared their own experience of how some of these communities had to dissolve overnight to escape the massive abuse. However, some of the affected people didn't intend to give up, but were determined to reorganize a similar community in a different location, further away from any city. The storyteller wanted to follow these people.

We need a different, a good destination, but which one? Where can we go, far away from the cities, so that we're safe? And how could we travel reasonably safely with Adina, Arthur, and all the luggage?

September 29, 2035

Noram is recovering quite well psychologically. Philip's death has shaken him deeply. He's working almost non-stop on trying to get the radio they salvaged in Heidelberg working again. Alex is helping him, and they both think they're slowly making progress. When Adina tries to encourage him to take a break, he dismissively says that Philip is sleeping enough for both of them. Sometimes he cries when he thinks he's alone. I saw it, but didn't say anything at first. The fact

that we lost Philip while acquiring the radio is deeply affecting all of us in the community. Philip's sister is having a really hard time coping with the loss and her grief. And on top of that, she also has to worry about her grandmother… like Arthur, old Helga will very likely have a hard time surviving until spring… I'm deeply aware of that… but on the other hand, the propensity for violence in extreme situations troubles me even more…

I remember Zanga once saying that back home in Koti, tempers sometimes flared, but they calmed down very quickly, and most people treated each other with kindness. He suggested this might be because his region is relatively remote and has always had different social structures than in Europe. Right now, I can only dream of people being able to move around here without fear. It's gotten so bad; there are still groups who see the law of the strongest as their own and plunder and rob everything that isn't defended with violence. When Zanga talks about solidarity and cooperation within large family communities that help each other in times of need, I can only dream of that here.

But I do sometimes get the feeling that things are changing for the better here, too. Admittedly, there are still many who only want to enforce the »social order« through armed force. However, there are also more and more people here who are open to a peaceful and cooperative coexistence with mutual support, without the usual trade compromises and contracts. Could this also be related to the extremely harsh external conditions? The weather has deteriorated as expected. The ash clouds keep darkening the sky, and it's colder than we anticipated. It's raining a lot, which is a good thing. Ultimately, the ash will ensure good harvests... for those who survive until then... and we will only do that if we learn to stick together.

From my perspective, the collapse of the global financial system only caused chaos for those who had profited most from it. People who had no money anyway were simply relieved, as their debts were wiped out – the money is now worthless. I suspect this has opened

the eyes of many, allowing them to see this »reality«, which had been presented to them for a very long time as having no alternative, in a different light. Since the money is now unusable, having existed only as bits and bytes in the computers of the stock exchanges, everyone is forced to focus on what is truly essential for survival. And money is no longer one of those essentials!

After Antim's visit, I believe I can see the fruits of this realization here as well. If what he said back then is true, then communities of solidarity are forming everywhere, just like ours. And, what pleases me most, they defend themselves calmly and without hatred against those who don't yet recognize, or can't accept, that they too could belong.

I would like to know how Zanga and Jitu are doing… but I don't see any way to communicate with them yet.

»Law and order« versus »cooperation and solidarity«—that seemed to have been a crucial question back then. Thinking about it now, I feel an inner resistance to engaging with it. Not because the question wasn't important, but because it shouldn't really be relevant anymore. I experienced firsthand during the ferry crossing off the coast of West Africa that this isn't the case today. There's clearly a learning curve, or perhaps a developmental curve, that people and our communities have to go through again and again. Then, perhaps, a certain understanding of law and order can give way to an inner feeling and perception of solidarity and cooperation within our shared life context. It's too much for me to think about it any further, but I sense that these questions are extremely important.

I'm just looking around again. It seems like it's finally starting, I have the feeling. Inga and Adama are now on board. Inga has a checklist where she writes down everyone who enters the boat.

“We are now all together. If we set off now, we will reach Kete Krachi at this time tomorrow,” she says to Adama.

“I’ll let the captain know…” he replies and goes to the helm.

The lines at the dock are cast off and the boat quickly picks up speed. A few houses slip by on the starboard side, and the forest becomes increasingly dense and green. Many birds circle overhead, probably searching for food for their young, and perhaps

hoping to find something on the boat as well.

"I think we'll have to sail through the night, otherwise we won't make it by tomorrow afternoon," says Kasim, who has just appeared next to me. "Perhaps our two skippers will need support in the form of a night watch?"

"Yes, that's conceivable, although they're both equally skilled at handling the boat and can take turns," I reply. "But it doesn't hurt to ask, does it?"

Kasim walks towards the helm and speaks to the older of the two. He nods politely, but his hand gesture suggests that this isn't necessary.

"The two of them are doing just fine without us," says Kasim, sitting down next to me.

Large buoys pass our boat at regular intervals. They appear to be new, or at least very well maintained, as their paintwork is still bright red and white.

“What are these buoys for?” I ask Kasim. “They don’t carry any navigational markers and have been placed very regularly.”

“They mark the course of the waterway and the route of our underwater network cable, which acts as the backbone of our MultiNet. Look up there,” he explains, pointing to a larger station attached to the buoy. “These test stations, equipped with a Wi-Fi module and solar panel, are installed every twenty kilometers. They are used for maintenance and fault location. We can also communicate with the MultiNet from here. Very practical when you’re out for days without a port or your community. But the best thing is, they transmit a radio signal and also serve as navigational aids after dusk, during nighttime passages.”

I find this technical solution for communication very interesting. We don't use anything like that at home; at least, I'd never read or heard of it before. Well, we don't have such huge lakes like here. Things are very quiet at the moment, so I can quickly check if Ethan has written anything specifically about this topic.

April 7, 2040

Jitu finally managed to get the community radio in Koti working. We heard Zanga's voice again for the first time in ages. It was a nice change from just getting messages from him on the bulletin board. We also managed to organize a short but informative radio conference with Noram. We're in contact with Noram almost every day, at

least for a few minutes. He's currently participating in the discussions about the technical development of interregional communication. The focus is on connecting more communities to the interregional network. Technical decentralization has its advantages and disadvantages. The main topic is how best to ensure decentralized communication between communities, whether via radio and/or cable connections, and what would minimize energy consumption.

Noram also asked me to participate in the global discussions in his place. He seems to feel more suited to the technical implementation; he's not so good with words. While I have a different opinion, I understand that he'd rather focus on solving technical problems than constantly participate in international discussions. However, he does want to participate in the internet forums himself.

In many places, implementing networking is difficult because the necessary technical knowledge is lacking. Many people don't know what's needed to establish and maintain a stable internet and telephone connection for a community. I don't know either, but Noram provides me with the necessary information. From his perspective, it's important that, despite cultural differences, the globally implemented solutions are as standardized as possible. This facilitates troubleshooting when problems arise, as well as the sharing of equipment and spare parts between communities, enabling them to better support each other locally, regionally, and globally.

Whether it's laying cables or installing radio stations, local solutions must consider the mutual equilibrium. Laying cables initially means a massive intrusion into the landscape. While installing radio stations has a smaller impact on the environment, they consume significantly more energy and may even be harmful to living beings in the immediate vicinity. Both solutions are ultimately only for us humans, as we alone derive the direct benefit. Humanity, and therefore every community, must consciously assume this responsibility and ensure that a balance is struck.

In parallel, Adina and I are participating in the local efforts of various

communities to revitalize knowledge transfer in as many areas as possible. Education is extremely important for everyone, regardless of age. We are trying to emphasize that every community needs at least one person who takes responsibility for education and serves as a point of contact for the community, even beyond its local area. This proposal didn't just come from us, but simultaneously from many communities around the world.

I'm also observing that it's becoming increasingly clear everywhere that knowledge is decoupled from »science« and that »education« is merely a toolbox that can help in mastering daily challenges. At the same time, however, it's also becoming clear that scientific research should be resumed. Somehow, we now need to get some universities and colleges up and running again. But how? No one really knows at the moment, since many researchers have passed away and, due to circumstances, no new generation of researchers has been able to emerge in recent years.

It is often said that much can be »knowing intuitively«... without having to develop an »understanding« of it or having it taught in a school setting. And, very importantly, this is not about religiosity or any kind of belief, but rather about an expanded conscious perception of existing and collectively accumulated knowledge, which apparently can be available to every consciously living person.

Above all, the importance of spiritual insight, and thus spiritual development, is becoming increasingly clear to Adina and me. I feel within myself, on a physical level, a sense of what is happening to us right now, something for which I find our language inadequate as a descriptive tool.

The statements in the last entry touch me in a way I don't quite understand. They make me thoughtful, yet their meaning feels intuitively familiar. I have to put the thought aside, though. My stomach is rumbling. *›It's time for supper.‹* In the dining room, a small buffet is being set up for dinner. The room is sparsely lit by a few small wall lamps, which, despite the very basic furnishings, makes it feel very inviting and

cozy. Most people gradually join the group, taking something to the tables as they pass by.

I take some fruit and a piece of something that looks like cake and sit down right by the door, at the head of one of the four long tables. The air is humid, and the evening breeze sweeping across the lake doesn't really dissipate the mugginess. I'm surprised to see that some people have put on long sleeves and even cardigans. I'm warm, and my T-shirt is already too much. *›Well, it's much colder where I come from compared to this region... people here obviously have a different perception of cold than I usually would...‹*

Ferouse brushes her hand against my shoulder as she enters the room, seemingly without realizing it. I watch her get something to eat and then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, sit down next to me. Aidah and Kasim, who follow her, sit opposite us. *›We've kind of become a little group,‹* I think, not quite sure what to make of it. I find it very pleasant that Ferouse is obviously seeking my company. She's currently resting her leg gently against mine, very intimately. Admittedly, this makes me a little uneasy. I wouldn't mind being alone with just her. Kasim and Aidah might want to go somewhere together, after all. I smile inwardly when Kasim breaks the silence.

“I just remembered something else about the buoys,” he said, addressing me directly. “Transport and communication in this region are now handled exclusively by waterway. This has led to many roads being unused for twenty years, allowing nature to reclaim even the asphalt-covered surfaces.”

“Yes, only a few communities still live along Lake Volta. Over time, the number of people living here has been reduced to a manageable level, in line with the natural equilibrium. Many settlements, whether villages or towns, located further away from the Volta have been deliberately abandoned, and vegetation has reclaimed the resulting uninhabited space,” Ferouse says. “This has further reduced the number of roads that are actually needed and used. Nowadays, there are very few transport routes left in the forests around Lake Volta, and these are intentionally not very well paved and are only used in exceptional circumstances,” she adds.

I listen to her intently, though, as I've now realized quite clearly, it's definitely not because of what she's saying. *›Not good, Mika, not good at all...‹* I tell myself, giving myself a stern talking-to.

“How large is the population supposed to remain here?” I ask curiously. “In the larger European region I come from, it’s about eight million people. My German grandfather told me that around eighty million used to live in the same area.”

“Here at Lake Volta, the population shouldn’t exceed two million. That’s been confirmed in recent years,” says Kasim. “When we count the trees and animals, we can see a steady increase; it’s wonderful to observe and is mainly due to the smaller population. Fewer people need less garden and farmland, and so there’s more space for all the other beings, for the enormous diversity of species that should actually be at home here. Thirty million people used to live here, with their villages, gardens, fields, roads, cars, and garbage. Definitely too many for this region.”

Kasim's tone surprises me. He sounds somewhat agitated, as if he's arguing with someone. He seems to have dedicated his life to maintaining the balance between humans and all other beings. I've only known him a short time, but I feel as if I've known him much longer. Much of what he says is self-evident to me. However, it seems he must have had different experiences if he argues this way even when no one is around to contradict him.

“Nature’s reclaiming of habitat works very well in my region too,” I say. “You can see the merging of forests into ever larger wooded areas particularly well. Every year we find more and more places where meadows have been reclaimed by young trees and bushes. During my history studies, I learned that people used to rave about the so-called cultural landscape. This referred to the shaping of natural spaces by humans for their own needs. Forests were mostly maintained only as areas for forestry, as they called it. Otherwise, there were only endless, deforested areas dedicated to intensive and destructive industrial agriculture—another strange name. I’m really glad I didn’t have to experience that. Today, there are more and more forest areas that people don’t enter at all, or only very rarely in exceptional cases, and then only with great care and consideration for all the other beings that live there.”

"History books tell us that Europe was probably primeval forest before the time of humans. It seems that this is slowly becoming achievable again," says Aidah. "Here, in the whole region, the situation is similar, but the regeneration of the forests is proceeding much faster under the tropical conditions, thankfully."

She puts her communicator back on the table.

"I just found the information about Europe on MultiNet," she says, laughing loudly

at herself. "Yes! I knew how to help myself."

I notice the glances Kasim is giving Aidah and wonder if I might be looking at Ferouse the same way. I turn slightly towards the door and let my gaze wander across the surface of the lake as it slowly glides past us. It's gotten quite dark, and I'm tired. Ferouse's leg is still resting against mine, and the touch sends an involuntary shiver through me. *›Huh...‹* I really don't know what else lies ahead, what experiences and adventures await me. The trip has definitely not been boring so far, but I hadn't consciously expected any of this. The evening breeze is getting a bit cooler, and I'm starting to think I should put something on. I cross my arms when a slight chill unexpectedly washes over me.

“You seem to be very tired, Mika,” I hear Ferouse’s voice very close and relatively quiet, as if what she is saying is meant only for me.

I turn to her and recoil. Her face is so close to mine that our noses have almost touched. She smiles and looks at me in a way I've never seen before. I move back a few inches to get a better look. I glance briefly at Kasim and Aidah, but they both seem very engrossed in gazing at the evening sky, with Kasim having sat very close to Aidah. *›Hmm... what's going on here?‹* I look back at Ferouse, who hasn't moved an inch and is still staring intently at me.

"Um..." is all I manage to say before I burst into a coughing fit.

"Now, now!" Ferouse laughs, patting me lightly on the back. "Have a drink, it'll make you feel better..." she adds, moving away from me slightly, though her leg remains resting against mine. "I hope my face isn't what startled you, is it?" she says, her eyes glittering in the dim light.

"No, no, not at all..." I manage to articulate, still trembling, as I try to take a sip of water.

›I'm behaving like an idiot...‹

“You’re right…,” I hasten to say something meaningful, “I am indeed tired and I’ve noticed that it has also become unexpectedly colder. I’m feeling a chill right now.”

Ferouse continues to smile without moving, and speaks very quietly so that only I can hear her.

"Then you must have to sleep, right? It's been a long day... I also need to rest, but I still have some things to discuss with Inga and Adama, you know, for tomorrow and the onward journey..."

Her voice is very pleasant, and her tone is so peaceful and familiar. I have no idea what to do now. She keeps surprising me. I can't really figure her out, and I don't want to think about what this is, or could be. I look into her eyes, and she looks back, very relaxed, blinking slowly. *›I'm fine with this, yes, it feels so good...‹*

“Yes, I think so too,” I whisper, my voice a little hoarse. “I should go to my bunk and get some rest for the night… Tomorrow is another day, isn’t it?” I smile at her, feeling a bit more secure.

“Yes, a good idea,” I hear her say. “Then we’ll see each other again tomorrow, bright and early, at breakfast, okay?” she adds, and I finally feel her leg move away from mine.

“Yes, see you tomorrow,” I reply, and then I get up too.

Kasim and Aidah turned to me and looked at me questioningly.

"What is it? Where are you going?" Kasim asks.

"I think I'll go to sleep. I've had enough for now. I need some peace and quiet," I murmur and slowly leave the room without waiting for further comments.

"Good night!" I hear Ferouse behind me.

I don't look over at Ferouse anymore, and I don't say goodbye any further. I sense it's not necessary. I also have the feeling that we both talked a great deal tonight, but entirely without words, and in a language that is intuitively very familiar to me.

Kete Krachi - Makongo

Incident in Kete Krachi

The morning light stings my eyes. The air is fresh and humid, and there's a slight breeze. I can hear life on board starting to stir again. *›I should eat something...‹* I climb out of my hammock in one swift motion, surprised by my own flexibility. Kasim has already left. The dining room is bustling. I look around but can't see Ferouse. Aidah and Kasim are sitting at the same table as last night, deep in conversation. I sit down and enjoy my breakfast.

“Good morning, Mika,” I hear Adama’s voice. “Can I count on you when we dock in Kete Krachi? We’re loading some support elements needed for the project. You can find the loading list in MultiNet, under Project Data. You’ve already got access, right? Could you check that the delivery is complete, please?” he adds, his voice sounding as if he’s about to run away.

“Good morning…” I reply, somewhat overwhelmed by his stream of words. “Yes, I’d be happy to. I was wondering what the new system was going to be mounted on…” I manage to add before I realize he’s already gone.

›I wonder what Ferouse is doing right now?‹ I think, surprised that I'm thinking it. The ferry is already heading towards the landing. The shore is covered in sand, and a few

palm trees line the narrow beach. In the background are a few huts and dense forest. A handful of people have gathered on the wooden jetty and are smiling and waving at us. This kind of greeting is apparently the custom here. A long shadow flits past in the water in front of us.

"Guys, watch out, we've just spotted a crocodile. They usually avoid crowds, but you never know," says the helmsman.

The people on the jetty also seemed to notice what was happening in the water. They laughed and gestured for us to simply dock.

"Come on, the crocodile's disappeared again. It sometimes gets lost around here. But nothing ever happens," someone calls to us from the shore. "Throw us your line, then we can tie up the boat."

"Thanks!" calls the helmsman back. "But we'll manage it ourselves. Kasim, please take the line that's in the bow and jump over when I stop the ferry at the dock! Then please tie us up to the bollard."

"Sure thing!" confirms Kasim and hurries to the bow of the boat.

With a gentle jolt, the ferry comes to a stop, and Kasim can easily take a step ashore. I see everyone exchanging brief, friendly greetings. A large number of crates are being unloaded, their contents unknown to me. I turn to my task and check the contents of the boxes with the support elements. According to the loading list, everything is in its place, as far as I can tell.

"Everything's complete," I say to Adama, who joins me.

"Good," he says, glancing at me briefly. "If everything's here, then we could quickly continue on to our next destination..." he adds before walking away again.

I can't quite interpret his expression. I watch him as he approaches Inga, constantly glancing at his communicator, and starts an excited conversation with her. It seems something isn't quite right, but I have no idea what it is. I go back on board and make sure the boxes are properly secured. I don't really know what kind of components they're supposed to be, or how they fit into the irrigation project.

I realize that I haven't yet familiarized myself enough with the details of the project I'm currently traveling for… And now I'm with the people I'll be working with for the next few months. *›They probably expect me to know everything. Like Adama did earlier, when he naturally assumed I knew exactly what needed to be checked on the*

boxes...‹ Luckily, I quickly found the list, and the number of carriers was correct. But I feel like the blind man who's supposed to know about colors. *›I know I need to catch up on this as soon as possible. But when? Everyone else knows what's going on and is doing what needs to be done, but me? I still have to read everything up...?‹* The thought keeps nagging at me. Right now, it seems unclear whether and when exactly we'll continue our journey. I quickly slip into the sleeping compartment. I leave the door slightly ajar. The project file gives me a description of the purpose; there are also building plans, quite a lot of them. It won't be easy to absorb all of that quickly. *›What have I been doing all this time? ... Damn, I definitely need help!‹*

There's no one on deck yet. Everyone's probably still ashore, or on the wooden platform of the dock. Adama and Inga are talking quietly, head to head, leaning over Adama's communicator. Kasim and another young man are fiddling with some large, but obviously light, sacks. Aidah is writing something on a piece of paper clipped to a wooden tray, seemingly watching Kasim and doing mental arithmetic... *›Isn't something missing?‹* a question buzzes through my head. *›Where has Ferouse gone? I haven't seen her today...‹* I suddenly remember. I step down from the deck onto the platform and don't quite know what to do with myself when Adama immediately grabs my attention.

“There you are, Mika, please come quickly, we need your help…”, I hear the command.

›That's just what I needed! Now things are getting dicey...‹ I mutter to myself and wave to Adama.

"I’m coming!"

"The spacers for the supports are still missing..." I hear Adama say to Inga. "They're nowhere to be found... Mika checked the boxes..." and then to me, "Mika, apart from the support elements, there was nothing else included in the boxes, right?" he asks, and I feel like he's accusing me.

"No..." I stammer awkwardly, because I hadn't actually looked for anything else in the boxes. I had only counted the supports and nothing else. *›...Crap, crap, crap...‹* I think as I search for a way out, which thankfully comes to me. "I can double-check, just to be sure..." I begin to suggest.

"Yes, please, but quickly..." Adama replies without looking at me.

In a few steps, I'm back at the boxes, carefully examining the gaps between the

wooden slats of the protective walls. Sure enough, on the pallet floor, among the stacks of support elements, I see more small wooden boxes, their markings identifying them as spacers. These are also on the list of components, but only at the end, under accessories.

"I found more boxes with spacers between the beams!" I call to Adama.

He looks at me without blinking and says dryly directed to Inga:

“Ah, there they are suddenly…”

Inga lifts her gaze and now looks at me too. I have the feeling that the two of them have been staring at me for hours when Adama's voice catches up with me again.

"Didn't you see that before? Or why didn't you check them off the list?" he asks in a calm voice, and I know I should probably tell the truth.

"I didn't know they were supposed to be included..." I begin uncertainly. "I'm not yet familiar with the details of the project and have no idea what the components are or where they're supposed to be installed later..." I continue, glancing at my communicator, as if the device could somehow have helped with my ignorance, but predictably, it didn't.

I sense Adama relaxing and see him put his communicator in his pocket. He looks meaningfully at Inga and then turns back to me.

"My mistake, Mika," he begins, surprisingly to me. "I should have realized you couldn't possibly know everything yet. I saw how confidently you were participating the whole time and mistakenly assumed you knew everything and every detail. But that's obviously not the case, and I should have known. I mean, I should have known what was in the boxes and what the spacers were, not you. I should have told you what to look for so you could check. I'm sorry for the upset," he concludes.

I didn't expect this and I'm relieved. But I'm not entirely innocent either. And I don't really feel comfortable with the idea. Adama climbs on deck and disappears among the boxes.

"Thankfully, everything is here," I hear Inga say. "We can continue."

She looks around and then speaks to Aidah.

"Is everyone already on board? Or has Ferouse not returned yet?"

›There she is again, Ferouse, or rather, there she is not yet...‹ I'm not happy with this situation. I feel like I've somehow lost these people's trust. I don't know what to say

and I have a really uneasy feeling in my gut. I look at the long boat with all the loaded boxes and would like to do something to make everything alright again. *›Maybe it's all just in my head...?‹*

“Are you coming aboard too, Mika?” I hear Inga’s voice right behind me, and I recoil slightly. “Relax, young man,” she laughs, putting a friendly hand on my shoulder. “You’re neither the first nor the last newcomer to have this particular experience with Adama …” she whispers softly in my ear, smiling at me. “Everything’s fine, and you haven’t done anything wrong. But you should know that Adama has very high standards for its colleagues and wants to thoroughly vet everyone before working with them…” she says, and then boards the ship.

›Oh, well then... that was a close call, but I still need to fill in the gaps in my knowledge, and quickly...‹ I think to myself as I board the ship. *›But where is Ferouse?‹* I see her and a little girl standing in front of the wheelhouse, talking to the captain. Inga and Aidah are there too. I approach discreetly, but definitely with curiosity.

"Now that Ferouse and Tanisha are both on board, we can continue our journey," Inga is just resolving.

"Thank you for letting me come all the way to Tamale. I want to visit my grandparents there," I hear the little girl say.

The captain looks at the girl and nods kindly. Ferouse takes Tanisha's hand, and they both disappear between the large boxes toward the cabins. With Kasim's help, the boat has cast off again, and the captain steers through the channel marked by buoys. The people on shore wave to us for a long time. I wave back, too, until there's nothing but forest to be seen beyond the next bend.

I feel a bit exhausted. Adama's task for me, and my obvious failure, are getting to me. After all the excitement, I just want to be alone. I find a spot at the bow of the boat where no one else is sitting and pull out my communicator to pretend I'm busy, hoping to be left undisturbed for a while. A little reading will take my mind off things. I try searching through Ethan's notebooks with a general query about »food« and »community«. While the archive is being searched, I close my eyes. It feels good and helps me switch off. I can feel the vibrations of the electric motor, the light, warm breeze on my skin, the rustling of the leaves on the bank, the lapping of the water against the hull of the boat. I could easily fall asleep if the others' voices weren't so loud and if I weren't ashamed of just wanting to take a nap.

A soft beep reminds me of the query I sent, which has obviously just returned something. Two entries are currently relevant to me.

March 27, 2034

It's that time again. We have to get out of here. Yesterday, those bandits were on the street, and I have the feeling we only just barely escaped them breaking into our place and wreaking havoc… The little food we have left is now so precious that they're risking everything and are prepared to do anything to get it. It's shocking that this is what the very people who are supposed to protect us are doing. They're using their violence, their weapons, and their vehicles to rob us of even what we've worked hard for… or they want to force us to work for them like slaves. Because help from the government, from which the military obviously benefits, never reached us… But what do I find surprising… as if, systemically speaking, this wasn't clear from the beginning. I'm glad Noram managed to escape them. Otherwise, he too would have been »mobilized for work«, as they call it, and »motivated« to work by force, like everyone else they captured and crammed into the trucks. Simply walking around on the open street has become very risky.

This method of »mobilization« is thousands of years old, and I could have foreseen it much earlier. I'm also angry with myself for not having thought about a suitable escape route much sooner. This region has become far too dangerous simply because of its location. On the other hand, it's clear that they are just people themselves, who are obviously starving... but there are other ways, like how we have been living and interacting together here for some time now. But the power that still exists tempts them to violence. Why cooperate when you can simply take what's left by force? And anyone who resists them dies.

Noram, who travels a lot, says that the old cemeteries are no longer used due to overcrowding, and mass graves are now being used for burials, sometimes even right in the middle of cities. Apparently, someone removes the bodies from time to time. People are dying

like flies these days.

»Heading south«—that's what many of the people who passed by a few days ago seemed to want to do. They weren't in good health, though, and unfortunately, we couldn't really offer them anything worthwhile. They wanted to go to the Black Forest; they'd heard there were still places in the valleys there that were more sheltered and somewhat secluded. I don't know. It's a very long and dangerous journey… but I don't see any real alternative at the moment. Sadly.

We finally need to get away from here. Somewhere where we can live in peace. Perhaps even live differently than we have lived together so far. That's possible. We're experiencing that here too, despite the hardship. We help each other wherever we can. Some of us have died, either from starvation or illness, but nowhere near as many as in the cities that tried to survive without gardens… But it's precisely these gardens that are now making us targets here…

I need to think this through more carefully. The term »military« in particular strikes me as quite strange in the context of food supplies. This is certainly because I've only ever read about »military« and »armies« in history books. Despite the sometimes very detailed descriptions, I can't quite grasp the concept. The very idea that people joined such »armies« is difficult to comprehend. »Armies« specifically led and maintained by people, who then went on to inflict violence on the very people that were actually supplying them with food. Ethan's notes frequently record facts and events concerning the »military« and »army personnel« that don't exactly paint these organizations in a positive light. They existed, obviously, and even though I can't really imagine them, I'm still secretly very glad that I wasn't there when they were still in operation.

December 12, 2037

Wintertime allows us to breathe a sigh of relief, quite literally. What could be grown and harvested last summer is stored in our pantries, and we must ensure that these supplies last for everyone until spring.

In our area, we have identified almost twenty small communities so

far. Noram and I have already visited some of them. We are trying to convince them of the advantages of local and regional networking. Based on our experiences so far, there is a lack of trust in many places, which we can well understand. Since they also often lack technical equipment, many of these communities cannot be immediately integrated into our networked communication system. Noram is looking for at least one person in each community who feels confident enough to acquire the necessary knowledge of communication technology. He emphasizes the importance of local technical responsibility because, if a problem arises, it can take weeks in the worst-case scenario before technical assistance can be provided by another community.

I am amazed and delighted by the patience and empathy with which Noram can approach people. He must have inherited that from Adina… he then clarifies with each individual exactly what needs to be found and what else would be required to connect to the existing, but still loose, communication network. Most of the time, these small communities lack a suitable radio, and those have become scarce.

The weather has largely stabilized, and the cold spells are no longer as long or as frosty. However, the cold and damp weather, combined with the still limited food supply, always carries the risk of illness. Noram and I are being very careful while we travel to avoid catching anything and then bringing those illnesses home with us.

Adina and I talked at length about how to encourage the formation and organization of more communities. We're not the only ones concerned with this topic. In my experience, most of the communities we visited formed around a core family that had already found a suitable place of refuge and was then able to take in other people. However, some communities arose from people who came together by chance.

I also addressed these patterns in one of the recent radio meetings and received confirmation, at least from within Europe, that this observation has been made elsewhere as well. However, opinions differ on whether one approach or the other is better or more suitable

for community building. Our experience in Walzbachtal is rather heterogeneous, as the people who once owned the estate have since passed away, and we can rightly claim to be a motley crew. It's a small miracle that we manage to get along so harmoniously despite our differences. Of course, the specific circumstances may be the reason this has been possible so far. But we've already overcome a great many difficulties together, and as the saying goes, people show their true colors in tough times… so things can only get better, I hope.

A persistent problem is the supply of medication. It's becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. The good news is that we humans are now being forced to refresh our knowledge of medicinal plants. In almost every community we visited, we found at least one person who knew something about herbs. Some even told us that they had consciously planted medicinal plants in their gardens and showed us their herbal pharmacies. Our Andrea even visited one of the local herbalists herself to exchange ideas.

Attitudes towards one's own lifestyle seem to be slowly changing. As in our own community, very few animals are kept in the communities we know so far. The chickens, sheep, and cows, which have become rare, are no longer slaughtered so readily. I perceive a new awareness regarding animal husbandry and a greater preference for a vegetarian diet in the conversations. The topic of »meat consumption« comes up more and more frequently in radio meetings, and it's being discussed not only in communities in the former EU territory but also in other communities around the world.

Fortunately, I live in the post-transformation era. I experience my great-grandfather's dream as my reality. However, every time I read his notes, I must remind myself that there was a time when today's reality was merely a wish for many people. It was an uncertain undertaking, initially attempted by only a few, and ultimately took an entire generation before a sustainable level of development was achieved.

It's making me very thoughtful right now, and I intuitively feel a great deal of respect and gratitude that today, here on a boat on the Volta River, surrounded by people I

don't really know, I don't have to worry about my safety at all. I can't say I understand what's happening to me. But it feels good.

Stop in Old Makongo

The captain and his colleague are discussing something rather excitedly. *›Why are they so frantic? They were so calm and collected the whole trip...‹* I think to myself, continuing to observe. Because they are speaking very loudly and using a dialect familiar to the translator, I can even understand what they are talking about. The men are discussing at length what new cargo to expect in Old Makongo for their return journey to Akosombo and why they need to take a two-day break. The captain's communicator beeps loudly, and the message obviously brings them some clarity. The return trip will apparently not take place for another week, and they both relax again.

I find it very interesting and exciting to experience the logistics process here firsthand. *›Especially when I have nothing else to do...‹* The water widens slightly in front of us, and the shoreline alternates between sandy and wooded areas.

"On the port side, you can just make out the abandoned buildings of the former settlement of Yeji," the captain says to me, pointing south with his outstretched arm. "And on the north shore, to starboard, the Old Makongo landing stage will soon appear."

"Our journey across Lake Volta is probably coming to an end soon..." I hear Kasim's voice behind me.

›Then I'll have solid ground under my feet again for a while,‹ I say happily. My communicator indicates that we'll be continuing our journey to Tamale by bus and our cargo by low-loader. Adama and Inga have now joined us, and Inga signals for everyone to focus their attention on her.

"Hi everyone, in Old Makongo we need to transfer our cargo from the ship to a flatbed truck. Please help! Thanks!"

"And remember not to leave anything personal on the ship!" adds Adama. "I always forget my charger and then have to go through the hassle of replicating a new one."

I follow Kasim towards the bunks. A large waterbird flutters along the shore and then flies gracefully over the bushes into the hinterland. With a few quick movements, I

pack my things into my backpack and look around carefully to make sure I haven't forgotten anything.

"We'll swap pallet jacks later, I'll take the easy-to-use one this time!" Kasim says to me, laughing loudly.

"Let's see who's faster..." I look at him with a grin.

Aidah, Tanisha, and Ferouse meet us on the way to the bow hatch. They already have their belongings with them. Ferouse is clearly carrying Tanisha's backpack, as the girl turns out to be Ferouse's niece. She's playing with Aidah.

“Tanisha and I decided to sit right at the back of the bus in the last row…” Aidah says, smiling. “That way we can keep a watchful eye on the others.”

“Exactly,” Tanisha says, looking at us cheerfully, “…And we’ll get to experience the most of the ride!”

There's clearly no dock in Old Makongo either. The road simply disappears into the water, and the boat, with its bow ramp lowered, heads towards it at a relatively high speed. My hand instinctively shoots to Tanisha's shoulder, who seems to be losing her balance as the boat reaches the shore.

“Sorry,” she says somewhat hesitantly.

“No problem!” I reply, smiling at her.

A few steps and we're all safely ashore. The road where we docked is lined with solar panels. A larger bus and the low-loader are still parked at the charging stations. Some people are already waiting for us. One of them drives the low-loader forward. We start loading the barge's cargo. Kasim and I are already working like a good team. We secure everything together carefully to prevent it from shifting. The seemingly fragile solar panels are loaded last. Although they're well-packaged and have survived the transport unscathed so far, Adama still checks their secure placement twice. *›He seems to be the perfectionist,‹* I think to myself during his inspection. *›This could get quite interesting during the project work...‹* We drive the pallet jacks back onto the barge. The farewell to the barge captains is brief but warm. The entire project team now goes ashore, and we gather at the bus.

My communicator buzzes and I see a few messages. One is from Ajola. *›Oops...‹* I feel a pang in my heart and realize I haven't contacted her in a very long time. *›I haven't actually contacted anyone...‹* whispers a slightly embarrassed thought, which

I quickly try to push aside. I'm so preoccupied with everything that's happening around me right now that I simply don't feel like sending messages to my family, or friends, or even Ajola. I realize quite clearly that I consider Ajola a friend, but not »my« girlfriend. *›...Was she ever?‹* I wonder, recoiling slightly from the thought. The memory of our last few days before my departure floods back. *›...Yes, there was something, wasn't there?...And why is it gone now?‹*

"Are you getting on? Or what are you doing here in the doorway?"

Kasim looks at me questioningly, and behind him is the whole group who also want to take the bus. I actually block the bus door, thus blocking access. I take a step to the side, and the communicator falls from my hand as my back unexpectedly hits something soft.

"Hey, watch out! There's someone behind you!" I hear Ferouse's voice, followed by her laughter. "Where are you with your thoughts, dear Mika? You're certainly not with us!" she declares, then nimbly glides past me and onto the bus.

I must look very confused, because everyone passing me is giving me sly glances, as if they're trying to suppress a laugh. I gather the communicator from the dust, pretend nothing happened, and take a few more steps to the side. I wipe the communicator screen clean and try to concentrate on reading the message list. I already know I owe Ajola and my parents quite a bit of travel information. Maybe during the journey, when I have a bit more peace and quiet. Since Ferouse, Tanisha, and Aidah obviously want to be alone in the last row, I'm now sitting next to Kasim and just have to keep him from peeking over my messages. *›The question is, what should I write?‹*

I absentmindedly switch between several open apps on my communicator. I close some that I don't need right now, on the bus ride. I suppose I'm trying to distract myself so I don't have to deal with writing messages to those who are waiting for a sign of life from me. The truth is, I don't feel like it. No, it's not about feeling like it. I'm simply not ready to open up to them yet. I'm experiencing so many things right now, so different and sometimes confusing, and I just don't know how to put it all into words without being misunderstood.

The archive app is still open and displays a list of results from the last query. It mainly focuses on communities and the development of today's communication infrastructure.

April 17, 2041

It's a joy to be able to stroll through our orchard. The cherry trees are now covered in white blossoms, the bees are buzzing busily… spring has brought us so much life, and we see this especially in the lushness of the gardens and fields. The exchange of experiences about permaculture, which is now gaining worldwide recognition, has definitely contributed a great deal to this. It feels like every community worldwide that is already connected via radio is involved in this fruitful exchange of experiences and actively participates in it.

This newfound vitality naturally applies to all living things, including viruses, bacteria, and microbes. They have multiplied prolifically in the dysfunctional sewage systems of the »centers of civilization« and have caused numerous deadly disease outbreaks in recent years. The Working Group on Population Development presented a shocking interim report just yesterday. The good news is that most infectious disease outbreaks now appear to have ended. The less good news is that the resulting global mortality rate is estimated at around five percent. This means the current world population has shrunk to approximately 2.2 billion.

The analysis shows that the high death rate primarily affected people still living in the suburbs of major cities. Many died from infectious diseases caused by contaminated water. Access to medical care and remaining medications was long controlled by local armed gangs or violent elite security forces, or linked to enslavement and abuse. Few people, therefore, had a chance of avoiding illness.

From the perspective of a global equilibrium of all life, all of this makes logical sense, even if many people still consider this sense »misanthropic« or »contemptuous of humanity«. However, if we seriously examine ourselves, we must also recognize that all of this is the consequence of our own actions. Yes, our numbers are dwindling, and perhaps we are becoming wiser. Nevertheless, this also presents the potential for us to use this understanding to design a new way of life for ourselves, one that truly takes the shared equilib-

rium into account.

So there's still a lot to do. And that's primarily related to the pragmatic aspects of life. For example, Noram received the first email from Jitu while in Morocco; Jitu is currently traveling in a community near Accra. This proves that some of the submarine cables, or rather their land connection nodes, have been opened by the temporary ruling groups, AND that the decentralized internet already has a very basic, functional structure. Everything is progressing, slowly perhaps, but steadily. I'm really looking forward to more voices from Africa in our internet forums and discussion groups. The people of Africa have simply been ignored for far too long, and they can contribute so much to our shared development with their experiences.

Even small successes are very important, such as the successful commissioning of the first router and several Wi-Fi extenders in our community. While there's still no mobile network coverage, locally functioning smartphones can communicate with each other via this Wi-Fi network.

I have a good feeling about global communication. I think it's extremely important that every person, or at least initially every community on the planet, can participate in the shared dialogue and thus have a say in decisions about common issues. Currently, there's a minimal, decentralized communication infrastructure on every continent, built with very modest resources. Global communication, especially via the still-unstable internet, is now possible between a few defined nodes. This infrastructure is no longer controlled by armed groups. That's at least a good start.

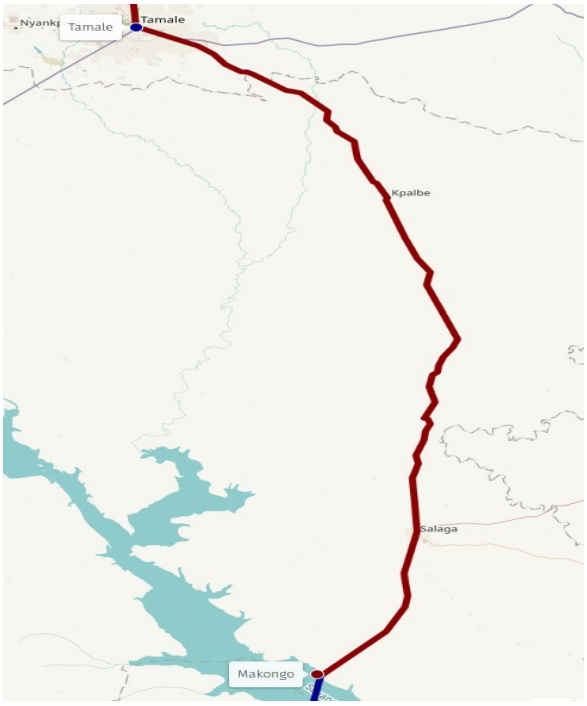
A major problem is the availability of technical equipment of all kinds. It is now very scarce. While repair and recycling are used to reuse as much as possible, this is still not quite enough. Therefore, there are already interregional discussions about reactivating some industrial plants in order to produce at least the tools and technical equipment that are absolutely essential. However, this requires very precise and concrete planning and implementation to ensure that the principles of

mutual equilibrium and actual needs are met.

For this, we need more knowledge, more education. I've learned a lot from Noram, and I'm trying my best to help connect the university library in Heidelberg to the decentralized internet. Heidelberg is currently free of armed individuals and otherwise completely deserted; only the university grounds are being maintained for educational purposes in cooperation with the surrounding communities. This is part of regional efforts to comprehensively document the technical knowledge that still exists in universities and workshops and to pass it on to a new generation of young people.

I need to give some more thought to these last statements by my great-grandfather… and I suspect he was also referring to the knowledge available to us today. What always touches, amazes, and confuses me is trying to imagine that in the early days of this world I'm privileged to live in, especially after the period of global catastrophes, there were roughly three times as many people on the planet. Even more unimaginable for me is that before that time, there were about ten times as many people on Earth. I truly can't picture how these people lived back then, predominantly in enormous and overpopulated »cities«.

I let my eyes wander over the landscape to escape this thought again. From the confined perspective of the bus, there isn't much new to see. Kasim is also looking out the window, lost in his own thoughts. I can hear the quiet hum of the engine. Everyone has obviously boarded, and we'll be leaving very soon.



Makongo - Tamale

From Old Makongo to Tamale

Our bus starts moving behind the fully loaded low-loader on the road towards Tamale. Due to the dust and the partially open side windows of the bus, the driver

maintains a good distance from the vehicle in front.

The settlement slips past us, and only a few permaculture gardens line the roadside. These give way to increasingly dense forest, through which the once-tarred road winds its way. The asphalt surface has been replaced by a thick layer of compacted gravel. Most likely for breathability and probably also for water permeability, I think. Between the trees, savannah-like clearings appear, where only bushes and shrubs are the tallest vegetation. Every now and then, I think I see some antelopes in the distance. However, they are so shy and fast that I can't be entirely sure. The bus rocks quite violently. The road is paved, but not completely smooth; this is quite noticeable during the ride. Kasim and I, sharing the middle bench seat, find ourselves unintentionally and unexpectedly very close to each other. Texting messages on the communicator under these conditions is not a good idea.

"How many communities live along this road? It's in surprisingly good condition!" Kasim asks the bus driver curiously.

I look at Kasim in utter surprise, because I wouldn't exactly describe this road as being in good condition. But Kasim obviously has different expectations regarding the quality and condition of a road surface. I want to ask Kasim about it, but the bus driver is already answering.

“Oh wait, besides Makongo, the communities of Salaga, Wangasi, and Palbe are located here. Salaga is right next, up ahead. And of course, Tamale,” she says somewhat hesitantly. “And we all contribute to the upkeep of this road. After all, it’s the only road to Tamale and Lake Volta. All the other side roads and even larger settlements like Bimbila or Yendi were abandoned back then. These areas are wilderness again now.”

“I find it amazing that you were able to remove the asphalt so thoroughly. It certainly wasn’t easy, was it?” I hear Kasim ask again.

“No, it wasn’t exactly easy, but not terribly difficult either. The asphalt was of poor quality and already very potholed and brittle. Disposing of it, or rather, finding a sensible way to reuse it, was much more challenging,” the bus driver says proudly. “Everyone agreed that the earth needed to be able to breathe again and that we humans had to ensure the road was then paved in a way that wouldn’t cause any further damage to the surrounding area. The gravel is an interim solution because it requires a lot of attention to keep the road in good condition… we’re still looking for suitable al-

ternatives that allow for both safe driving on the road and the preservation of the earth’s surface… we’ve also developed a device for the buses that measures and records the unevenness of the road surface throughout the entire journey. At the end of each trip, we know exactly where the repairs need to be made,” she concludes, before turning her gaze back to the road.

"Look up ahead, a group of water buffalo is heading down to Lake Volta," says Inga, turning from the passenger seat to us. "The lead cow looks a bit older. Or is that just the layer of mud on her coat protecting her from the mosquitoes?" she adds, laughing.

The herd barely notices us and moves on with a few calves and young animals. I've never actually seen water buffalo in person. But I find these animals remarkable, with their calm and apparent serenity. I know, however, that if they feel threatened, they can become very quick and very dangerous. Fortunately, there are no longer any unnatural dangers for them, as I once read.

"So how do you deal with the elephants here?" I hear Kasim ask again.

"You mean because of the gardens?" the bus driver replies with a question of her own.

"Yes, exactly. It's not easy to stop them from helping themselves so liberally, is it?"

"Well, it's not a simple matter, indeed," she begins to answer.

I'm really curious to hear what she has to say. It's well known that elephants, as the largest land mammals, are notoriously difficult to dissuade from helping themselves to the many tasty treats offered by humans when searching for food. There are countless posts in online forums about how to interact with elephants in a species-appropriate manner. Nevertheless, it always remains an interesting question how the situation is handled locally.

"Above all, we always keep an eye on the elephants' natural migration routes and try to conduct our human affairs as far away from them as possible. This way, we don't get too close, and the permaculture gardens aren't so easy for the elephants to find. However, their migration routes do change from time to time, and then they might stumble upon our gardens. If that happens, we leave them alone and wait until they've moved on. We can't exactly forbid them from feeding themselves. That's why the gardens are planted in different locations, precisely so that they aren't all discovered at once. This way, our supplies aren't really threatened. We let the discovered

gardens grow wild, and since they no longer produce as much fruit, after a while they're removed from the elephants' foraging routes—meaning they simply stop coming because there's nothing left to find..."

The bus driver suddenly interrupts her story and skillfully swerves around two large potholes in the road. She stops abruptly and frantically searches for something in the door pocket. She then gets out with a can of paint and a brush, goes to the nearest tree, and paints a large, bright yellow »X« on its bark.

“I thought you had a system that automatically registers the bumps?” Kasim says to her when she gets back in the driver’s seat.

“Yes, we do, but it doesn’t always work and it’s not installed in all vehicles… for example, in this one the device is installed, but it’s not working properly yet… the guys in the workshop will have to take a look at it,” she replies and starts the bus again.

“But,” Kasim continues, “why the X on the tree? You can’t really miss the potholes, can you? How is that symbol supposed to help?”

"Aha!" smiles the bus driver. "Interesting, isn't it? Well, we have a prioritization code. The crews carrying out the repairs aren't always the same, so the information about what needs to be repaired first because it's too dangerous has to be available on-site somehow. The »X« means that the spot is very dangerous and must have top priority for repairs. Every new crew drives the route once before planning their work and gathers all the available information. They might see the potholes, but if they also find an »X« on a tree, then they know immediately that the road definitely needs repairing there. Yes, I know it's not exactly digital, but everyone can understand it, and it doesn't need any further explanation," she added, smiling at Kasim.

Kasim is smiling too, I see. For him, for me, for all of us, it's normal that we help and support each other as best we can. I just remember a notebook entry I wanted to read, which describes the beginnings of the supra-regional support structures.

> *April 9, 2038*
>
> *We have been traveling in the area for a while now, and the picture I can form of the current developments is becoming more complete in a very realistic way.*
>
> *It is indeed the case that in the most advanced communities around*

the world, the desire for a supra-regional organization arises almost simultaneously. This organization would facilitate cooperation while also considering local aspects on the basis of equality. This stems from the fact that these ideas are transmitted via radio to all receiving communities and then passed on locally to their inhabitants. This would then be, so to speak, our »propaganda«, which people like Noram, Adina, and I can effectively represent. However, we are not alone in this world, and there are other people who represent a different »truth«.

We have just returned from a community near Mannheim that vehemently defends the old »truth«. The people there are making massive attempts to reintroduce money as a medium of exchange. Apparently, they have a great deal of money, which they intend to use to attract people living in the surrounding area to work for them. They operate a radio program promoting a new »order« that aims to restore »normal working conditions« in order to put an end to the rule of »violence and hatred«, which in turn is supposed to lead to a »regulated life«.

Fortunately, their old ideology doesn't really resonate in communities based on dialogical communication and solidarity-based cooperation. We deliberately visited the community and listened to the alternatives the people there offered, without contradicting them. We also invited them for an exchange visit to show that money isn't necessary to live together and in community.

We didn't have a particularly good feeling when we extended our invitation. What we heard there sounded very similar to the campaign speeches of neoliberal parties – not a pleasant memory! But we also realized that, apart from the core group who had tried to convince us, the rest of the people there, about thirty in total, including many younger people around Noram's age, didn't really support these outdated ideas. Noram and I felt immediately after leaving that they simply didn't have any better alternatives than the antiquated views of the core group's speakers. This ultimately encouraged us to invite

them to our place for an exchange of ideas.

Of course, this also carries risks, because we can't know what this group is really up to. But it's worth a try. We need to build more trust, and the people there who were curious about alternatives certainly deserve our trust.

Adina added that we should insist that not only the »core group« of this »new« community should visit us, but also some of the less determined ones.

Ah yes, Zanga left a message on the radio meeting's notice board that Jitu has been at sea for a week, en route to us. I'm curious to see when he'll arrive. This is the first long journey undertaken by someone from our close circle of friends during this time of upheaval.

It was clearly not easy back then to convey that a new way of life was possible. But ultimately, even then, more and more people recognized that solidarity and cooperation could help support a shared equilibrium. What must it have been like in the time when this principle, this attitude to life, wasn't yet recognized by everyone? According to what I've read so far, nowhere was there an attempt to force people to live, think, or feel according to these principles of solidarity. But some people did live by them and thus became role models for many others. Was it equally difficult or equally easy to adopt this way of life everywhere on the planet? Was it easier in Africa than in Europe?

I'm very touched by the friendliness of the people throughout my entire trip so far. This is my first time here in Africa, but it doesn't feel like entering uncharted territory. It feels more like returning home… *›Could it be because my grandparents were born and still live here, unlike my mother, who lives in Europe?‹* I've never really asked myself this question before, and it surprises me that it's on my mind now. I have the feeling that my thoughts of Ajola, and at the same time Ferouse, are somehow prompting me to think about it. It suddenly becomes clear to me that they are both important to me, or have become important to me. Each, however, in her own very personal way. Ajola has been with me through my time on campus and our transition to adulthood, and we've become incredibly close. I've only known Ferouse for a short time, but I feel incredibly connected to her, and she's become very familiar to me very quickly. I admit, this is quite confusing. And, at the same time, I also like it… and that makes it

even more confusing.

I continue to gaze outside at the green of the passing trees and grasses, the reddish hue of the dusty earth, and inward, at the intensity of my thoughts. I let myself be relaxed by the bumpy, uneven ride, like a massage. I don't mind the rough road at all. Behind me, I can hear Ferouse and Aidah talking, but I don't understand a word, as they're speaking a dialect that my communicator doesn't translate. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Tanisha at the window. She's obviously tired and seems to be on the verge of falling asleep. We still have a while to go until Tamale, where she'll get off. *›There'll be network service there...‹* I think to myself. I think again about the messages I still need to write. *›That I have to write...‹* I can't see Ferouse because she's sitting right behind me. But I can feel her knees against my back. The seat back is quite thin, and every time the bus jolts, I get a lot of pressure on my ribs. That doesn't bother me either. *›I wonder if she'll be going to Koti too?‹*

“How much longer until we get to Tamale?” Tanisha’s voice rings out.

“Not much longer,” the bus driver replies. “Do you need to get off?” she asks, glancing briefly at Tanisha.

“No, no…” Tanisha waves her hand dismissively, then gazes absently out the window into the distance.

“When do you expect to get to Pô?” I hear myself ask.

“Most likely not tonight,” Inga answers briefly. “We need to recharge the low-loader’s batteries in Tamale, and that will take a while,” she adds.

“We’ll spend the night in the community center there and then head towards Pô early tomorrow morning, before the heat sets in,” I hear Aidah say behind me. “They’re expecting us there. We’ll also meet some people who will be joining us for the project in Gorom-Gorom,” she adds after checking her communicator.

“Will we have enough room on the bus?” Kasim asked anxiously.

“Yes, there are just two more assembly technicians who need to come along to install the panels,” Adama replied, this time looking in Kasim’s direction. “Once Tanisha gets off, there should be enough room, right? We’ll have to squeeze together a bit if necessary. But it’s only 230 kilometers to Pô, and more people will get off there,” he said, then smiled and followed, “including you and Mika…”

“…And me too!” Ferouse added.

I reflexively turn to her and must look very surprised.

“I’ll come along to Koti, first of all…” she says, looking directly at me. “I’m also invited to the family celebration, you know?” she smiles at Kasim and me.

I see Kasim's face fall as he prepares to ask his question, one whose content I can already guess. He looks expectantly at Aidah, who is looking shyly at her communicator. *›It seems the two of them got pretty close, but...‹* a playful thought flashes through my mind, and I can't help but smile at Kasim's concern. *›I just have to help...‹*

"That's wonderful..." I say to Ferouse, and then immediately add, turning my gaze to Aidah, "May I invite you to the family celebration in Koti, Aidah?"

It's truly fascinating to observe the storm of emotions on Aidah and Kasim's faces. I think I must be grinning so broadly that it must be making them both uncomfortable. All of this hasn't escaped Inga's notice, of course, because she subtly joins the fray.

“Actually, the work won’t really start for another week,” she begins, slowly building suspense. Aidah and especially Kasim are hanging on her every word. “…And we’ll have to wait for Mika anyway. As I understand from your documents,” she says to me very seriously, “the family celebration is planned for three days, and you’ll be joining the project in Gorom-Gorom afterward, correct?”

“Yes, that’s exactly right,” I interject, my grin becoming even more obvious as I confidently continue, “…That’s why I invited Aidah. I think she could join the celebration, couldn’t she?” I conclude, giving Inga a quick wink.

“Well,” Inga says, still with a forced serious expression, “if you promise to bring Aidah to the project too…”

That's the moment when carefree laughter lights up the whole bus. Well, except for Tanisha, I see. She hasn't really grasped what's going on and is looking questioningly at Ferouse. Ferouse whispers something in her ear, his gaze brazenly fixed on Aidah and Kasim. Tanisha smiles knowingly and looks out, embarrassed. Kasim and Aidah's faces simultaneously show joy, relief, and deep embarrassment. They probably hadn't expected everyone to have noticed what had developed between them. I feel the pressure Ferouse's knee exerts on my back and gladly resist, knowing full well that my nonverbal message is getting through to her very clearly. I feel better than ever before. I've never had this experience before, especially with so many people who all seem to know what's happening. And once again, I almost feel at home, somehow, and I'm happy about it.

"Next stop Tamale," the bus driver interrupts the pause, grinning broadly. "You're a

fun bunch, I really enjoy being with you... the community center is right in front of us," she adds, pointing through the windshield at the building ahead.

The low-loader in front of us has already pulled into one of the charging stations next to the community center, and the driver is now busy attaching the charging cable. The bus comes to a stop not far from another charging station, and the driver opens the doors.

"I'll load that one up too," the bus driver says to herself, and starts working on the bus.

"We'll be staying here tonight... since everyone's busy with dinner, I suggest we choose our own rooms and then meet briefly in the patio," Inga mentions busily.

Through the entrance, we enter a courtyard around which the entire building seems to have been built. *›Let's see, all the rooms face the garden and appear to be the same size,‹* I remark, marveling at this unusual architecture. Ferouse and Tanisha are just entering one of the rooms, laughing, so I simply take the adjacent room, which appears to be free. I put my things down and look for some water to quench my dusty thirst from the bus ride. Inga and Adama are chatting in the courtyard, obviously waiting for the rest of the group to arrive. I knock on Ferouse and Tanisha's door, which is ajar. Ferouse pokes her head through the crack.

"So we're room neighbors?" she asks, smiling at me.

"Yes, I thought that would be a good idea," I reply matter-of-factly.

Ferouse takes Tanisha by the hand and they both walk towards Inga and Adama.

“Tanisha will be picked up by her grandparents shortly,” Ferouse says to Adama. “I’d like to thank you in advance for making everything so easy.”

The large door to the street opens, and against the light, two silhouettes can be seen slowly moving towards us. Two elderly people, a woman and a man, are now visible. Both appear friendly.

"Tanisha, my darling, I'm so glad you came!" calls a female voice as the two approach Tanisha.

"I hope you had a good journey here, Tanisha..." adds the man's soft, deep voice.

When Tanisha realizes who is speaking to her, she tears herself away from Ferouse and runs towards them.

"Grandma... Grandpa... finally!" she cries, sinking into their embraces.

"Thank you so much for bringing our Tanisha home safe and sound..." says the grandfather, smiling, unsure whom to speak to first.

"A thousand thanks..." adds the grandmother.

Tanisha turns to Ferouse again:

"When will we see each other again?"

"Perhaps very soon, Tanisha!" says Ferouse, leaning towards her and hugging her.

The grandparents look at Ferouse briefly and intently, as if saying goodbye without words, gather their granddaughter, and head towards the door leading to the street. The grandmother pauses once more in front of the door, and I hear her say:

"We wish you a safe onward journey and perhaps we'll see you again!"

Then all three of them disappear. Ferouse stands motionless for a moment, her gaze fixed on the closed door, as if she wants to prolong the farewell. Behind me, I sense movement: a door closes, another opens, Inga and Adama whisper something, Kasim coughs softly… all muffled, as if time were passing very slowly and noticeably. Ferouse turns to me, and our eyes meet. *›...Why did we even took two rooms?‹* a hesitant thought arises, and I realize how much I'm looking forward to the time ahead.

Dusk is slowly falling, and lights are already on in some rooms. Two figures enter through the patio door. Adama approaches them and is greeted by a woman's voice. My communicator can't translate this regional dialect, but facial expressions and gestures suggest that everyone is greeting each other warmly. Inga comes out of her room and is greeted in English by the two women. Dinner seems to be ready, I assume, as Inga briefly invites us to follow her to the dining room. In the relatively large room, some of the tables are set, and along the wall is a simple buffet with local specialties, none of which I'm familiar with.

Ferouse has accompanied me the whole way here and, with a simple gesture, indicates that I should take a seat at a specific table. She simultaneously calls Aidah and Kasim over, so that the table is now occupied by the four of us.

“So, now we can plan our departure from Pô undisturbed,” Ferouse says to us. “We still need to confirm the bus, and we should do that today… not at the last minute.”

“I see you’ve prepared,” Kasim says to her.

I search my communicator for the previously stored route and find our current station in Tamale.

“It’s still about two hundred and fifty kilometers to Po, we won’t arrive there until early evening,” I interject. “So we’ll be spending the night there again?” I ask.

“That’s right,” Ferouse replies. “The day after tomorrow we have the last three hundred kilometers to Koti. I’ll let the bus station in Po know now when we expect to leave. Okay?” she asks, tapping her communicator.

Everyone agrees with the procedure. I send my grandparents a message from my communicator letting them know when we're expected to arrive.

“Mika? Our grandparents know who all will be arriving in Koti with us? You mentioned Aidah too?” Kasim asks me, making a face I can’t quite understand.

“Of course! I already texted Grandma Kyara shortly after we arrived here to let her know Aidah was coming along and celebrating with us,” I reply, and immediately feel Ferouse and Aidah staring at me in horror.

“That wasn’t a good idea…” Ferouse says after a moment of stunned silence. “It’s not proper to invite a strange young woman who isn’t supposed to be your companion…”

I'm probably looking around in a rather confused way, because Kasim nudges me in the ribs with his elbow and whispers maliciously in my ear:

"You see, different countries, different customs... I didn't even know that, it's such a women's thing, you know..."

I feel like I'm being taken for a ride right now.

“So, guys…” I begin, attempting to express my initial indignation. “First of all, now that we’re speaking frankly about this, it’s really your business, not mine…” I interject, glancing somewhat angrily at Kasim and Aidah, but simultaneously noticing that all three can barely suppress their laughter. “What…?” I blurt out indignantly.

The laughter is now clearly directed at me, and I have to admit that, despite all the confusion, I find the three laughing tormentors quite amusing. I wait patiently for the laughter to stop and ask again:

"Can one of you please explain to me what's so strange about that?"

Kasim gasps for air, his eyes full of tears. Aidah looks out the half-open window, her

face contorted, and Ferouse gazes at me with shining eyes. She's the one who speaks after a few seconds.

"Everything's already sorted out regarding Aidah. I wrote to Grandma Kyara and explained that Aidah is my colleague and will be staying overnight... and also why you invited her and what role Kasim plays in the whole story. She sent me back a long string of smiley faces. After your message, she'd been wondering how it was that you suddenly brought a young woman along. You can hardly imagine how big the misunderstanding had become for her by then..."

It's slowly dawning on me what I've done with my somewhat ill-considered message to Grandma. My heart is pounding, but I only see friendly faces in our small group. Kasim starts again:

“Mika, man, I have to both thank you and apologize. You wanted to have fun with me and help at the same time, I know that. But things work a little differently around here. What I mean is, we men aren't allowed to handle these matters on our own. Not until we're officially in a relationship with the woman in question. So, it's all good, you're from around here, through your mom, but you didn't really grow up here and couldn't have known how things work here…” he says, his voice now calm, and looks gratefully at Ferouse. “We always need a friendly mediator when it really matters,” he concludes.

“Mika,” I hear Aidah’s voice, “I thank you too, even though you didn’t really know what you were doing. Ferouse and I quickly agreed on how it should go so that everyone would be happy. However, we didn’t expect you to inform Grandma Kyara so quickly. That really surprised us and put us in a bit of a bind,” she says, taking Ferouse’s hand. “It’s a good thing Ferouse is also a distant relative and as my friend was able to handle it successfully,” she says with a happy smile.

›Man, I almost messed it up...‹ the thought trickles into my brain. I'm not feeling very comfortable in my own skin right now. But I'm really glad to have the three of them with me. Yeah, I have no idea what everyday life is really like here, what's actually considered proper and what isn't, what's expected of a young man my age and what isn't… and I feel that something is protecting my life, that something is watching over me… possibly in the form of these people I've only known for a few days.

◊ ◊ ◊

The darkness of the room is comforting. The only window overlooks the courtyard,

but it's no longer lit. Little light comes from the other rooms either. Most of our group seem to be asleep already. Our evening conversation has stirred me quite a bit and continues to haunt me. Especially Ferouse's last look as she disappeared into her room. Warm, yet clearly distant, leaving no room for misinterpretation. *›Perhaps that's precisely why I felt it so deeply in my heart?‹* I'm afraid that, after what I've just experienced, I won't be able to fall asleep right away anyway. I need a distraction, again. In this respect, Ethan's notes are very interesting and informative reading, especially since they also deal with my family. I search through Ethan's notes on the topic of »family«. There's even an entry about Koti.

> *August 16, 2045*
>
> *Jitu and Zanga gave us some insights today into the changes in their village of Koti in Burkina Faso. Apparently, there were some problems and conflicts due to differing opinions and ideas about how to organize daily life. However, they reported that the village community is now slowly and more closely growing together. Decisions made are now being implemented collectively.*
>
> *The old market square, which I remembered as dirty, smelly, and overcrowded with cars and people, has been transformed. Alongside the old kapok trees that had somehow survived the past decades, more trees have been planted to make the square greener and shadier. It will probably be a few years before the new greenery truly provides shade, as kapok trees need about three or four years to grow their first ten meters in height. But I can easily imagine what it will look like then.*
>
> *The biggest task, however, was probably removing the rubbish that had been left lying around the square and streets for years. The soil was painstakingly replaced to get rid of the oil and gasoline contamination. The cleared ground was planted with greenery as much as possible, and a few benches were placed on the practically newly created festival grounds for people to sit and relax. The pictures Jitu sent us show a promising start. And the picture of the celebrations, showing Zanga and Jitu with the large Kaboré family, has a rather calm and friendly atmosphere, quite unlike the previous celebrations,*

which were very boisterous and loud and usually ended in drunken stupor.

Images from Africa are unfortunately rather rare. But they are becoming increasingly common in internet forums, as the number of African communities connecting to the global network grows. From everywhere, it seems to me, people are proudly reporting on beautiful and, above all, livable environments.

I haven't forgotten that we Western »civilizations« exported our garbage to African countries for centuries. Jitu once told me that in Koti and the surrounding area, they still hadn't managed to collect all the plastic waste for later, meaningful reuse. Zanga jokingly remarked, however, that we could slowly start to feel like we were in Germany walking on Koti's streets, everything so clean and tidy...

I believe that communities in Burkina Faso, or elsewhere in Africa, if they develop in harmony with the shared equilibrium of all life, will possess their own distinctive character. Liberation from poverty and oppression, and integration into the regional culture, naturally lead to a way of life well adapted to the local climate.

Quite honestly, without the ubiquitous car traffic we were forced to leave behind, we now have far more opportunities to make our living environment more diverse and sustainable. I hope that even the people in Africa who might still feel they have some »catching up« to do will be able to recognize the advantages of this new way of life relatively quickly.

Here in Burkina Faso, too, a great deal has changed since then. I'm sure of that. *›However, not everything, despite the new insights, especially regarding customs concerning family relationships...‹* I chuckle to myself and then scroll on to the next entry.

May 5, 2010

Adina took a pregnancy test this morning, and yes, we're going to be parents. Now I'm wondering: Am I mature enough at 22, and can Adina and I manage everything with a baby? Finishing our studies, finding a bigger apartment, and then there are the very bourgeois expec-

tations of the Bregger family, who are always hounding Adina—those control freaks—it's going to be a lot of fun…

But wait! We've managed our lives very well so far, and we'll manage things with our baby just as well... I hope... and the Breggers don't stand a chance against us... that would be ridiculous.

Adina is absolutely thrilled and even cried tears of joy after the test. That's not like her at all; I've never seen her cry before…

We would generally have many reasons to cry, if I think only of the effects of the earthquake in Tahiti. Or the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, which BP is trying to cover up by any means necessary…

I am happy, but I am also worried about the world in which my, our child will live.

›Ah yes, that's a very old entry, long before the Transformation. That's obviously where my Grandpa Noram was created. Look at that...‹ I feel as if I'm peeking through a keyhole and have just had a secret, which isn't really a secret, revealed to me.

I stare at the ceiling. There's still light in the courtyard, and the bushes in the garden cast dancing shadows as they move in the wind. I see so many images in them, images I didn't even know I knew, or that could be inside me. Eventually, the shadows merge into a dance my eyes can no longer follow. It's late, and I'm tired.

Tamale - Pô

From Tamale to Pô

In the courtyard, Inga and Adama are having an animated conversation with two men. Many of us are already awake and ready to leave. Ferouse and Aidah look at their communicators and talk quietly. Kasim stands in the doorway of his room and yawns gleefully. Inga turns away from the two men toward the courtyard, clears her throat loudly, and announces:

"I see everyone has gathered here to depart for Pô! I would like to introduce you to Kweku and Yaw; they will be supporting our construction crew and traveling with us."

The men bow somewhat sheepishly as we greet them amidst the general commotion. Adama patt them both on the shoulder and leads them through the large door towards the street.

“They have funny names, I wonder what they mean?” I ask Ferouse and Aidah as we follow the others.

“I think they’re the days of the week they were born on,” Aidah tells us.

“Yes, Kweku is Wednesday and Yaw… as far as I remember… Friday,” Kasim replies.

“No, Yaw is Thursday!” Ferouse laughs. “It was a long-standing tradition here in this region, often practiced in large families. At times, international names, mostly English or French, were also used. However, after the Great Transformation, with the revival of some old traditions, original, locally used names were given more and more frequently. Because people realized through this comprehensive transformation that the balance of all life must be maintained, families today usually only have one to three children, not seven, eight, or even more. That’s why it’s rather unusual these days for boys to be named after the day of the week they were born,” she adds.

“Everyone get on!” calls the bus driver, who has positioned herself next to the front door of the bus.

I see that Adama is still talking to the drivers of the low-loader. Inga says goodbye to our hosts and gets on with us. Adama is the last to board. The bus then slowly starts moving behind the low-loader. "It will take a while before we get to Pô..." This time I'm sitting in one of the back seats of the bus. Ferouse is up front with Adama, obviously organizing something on the communicator. Aidah and Kasim are sitting together in one of the worn-out double seats, and I'd rather not imagine what they're doing. My seat isn't as comfortable as I'd hoped, but I'm not moving now. Abandoned houses and building complexes line both sides of the road, slowly but surely being swallowed up by vegetation. "These must be the suburbs of Tamale..." I think to myself. I realize my eyes are getting heavy, and I simply give in to the jolting of the bus.

◊ ◊ ◊

“We’ll reach Pô soon, where another driver will take over the bus,” the bus driver tells Inga, who had sat down next to her. “I’ll stay in my hometown for a few days be-

fore rejoining you. The second truck with the remaining building materials will arrive from Bamako in about seven days. I'll ride with that one to Ouagadougou."

"So you're from Pô?" Adama asked. "And you'll meet up with our group from Koti in Ouagadougou?"

"Yes, twice!" she replied kindly. "That's already planned. I'm visiting my family and then joining the second group. From Ouagadougou onwards, I'll take over the bus again for the group that's joining us from Koti."

We're now right in the middle of Pô. The low-loader and the bus both stop at the charging station. I'm looking forward to a bit of exercise; I find these long bus journeys quite tiring. As everyone gets off, they say goodbye to the bus driver.

"I'll see you again soon," I say to her. "Looking forward to it."

"Yes, sure. It's fun with you guys. I hope you have a wonderful celebration!" she smiles back.

Outside, I stretch a bit to loosen my legs, shoulder my backpack, and look around. There's another bus not far away. Besides us, the only other people I see are a young woman with a small child sitting on one of the wooden benches. The other bus seems quite full, though. Adama and Inga join me and call Kasim, Aidah, and Ferouse over.

"Do you see that other bus over there?" Inga asks. "Those people are also going to Koti with you. As far as I know, packed lunches have been prepared for you, and your journey to the family celebration will continue shortly…" she informs us briefly, and then, after a short pause, her gaze including Adama's, adds, "We're looking forward to seeing you again in Gorom-Gorom and would be very happy if you could be back in time for the start of work on the project."

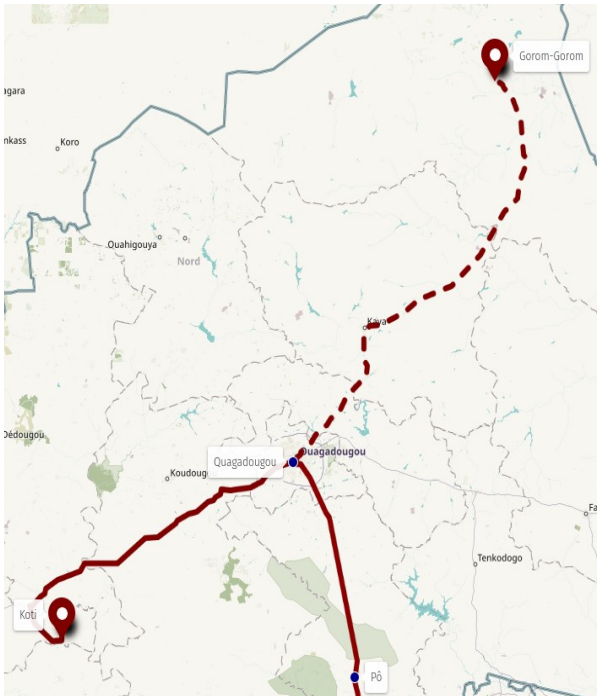
"We're looking forward to seeing you again too," Ferouse replies.

I just nod briefly. I find Inga's speech a bit out of place. *›Of course we'll be on time, as far as circumstances allow...‹* But I don't say that to her. We get our packed lunches and fill our water bottles. I put my communicator in my backpack and follow the others to our bus.

"Hi, we'd like to go to Koti with you, do you have four seats free?" Kasim asks the bus driver, who is about the same age.

"Four seats, right? Standing room is scarce!" he replies with a question of his own

and laughs loudly. "Sure, but no pushing... by the way, I'm Amadou. Come on in!"



Pô - Ouagadougou - Koti

Arrival in Koti

The bus stops abruptly at an intersection, and Amadou is talking loudly to a woman walking along the side of the road. They both laugh, and the woman eventually gets on. We then turn right, and in the distance, some houses can be seen along the roadside.

“We’re almost in Koti!” Amadou calls out to us all. “Please don’t leave anything behind when you get out of the car. I have to drive to Dano right away to pick up more people.”

The bus drives directly to a central square where many people are milling about, seemingly busy in a chaotic jumble. As the bus comes to a stop, the chaos suddenly freezes, and all faces turn toward us. *›Eerie...‹* The sun is still relatively high, and the light is quite harsh. I get off, and a loud murmur rises from the surrounding crowd. Kasim, Aidah, and Ferouse have already disappeared into the throng, and I notice that many of those present are staring at me quite openly.

“Mika!” shouts a strong male voice.

My grandfather Jitu moves towards me from the crowd with outstretched arms.

"You're here..." he whispers, pulling me close. "I'm so happy to finally see you!" he says, holding me at arm's length. "You're taller than I thought," he observes, his eyes sparkling.

I don't know what to say.

“Yes, Grandpa, I’m so happy to finally be with you after such a long journey,” I finally reply, and then I see Grandma Kyara standing next to me.

“Mika…” she says, smiling, and I can see that her eyes are moist.

I pull away from Grandpa's hug and turn to my grandma's petite figure. I hug her and feel how fragile she is, and how she trembles slightly in my embrace. She pushes me away a little and looks deep into my eyes. *›My mother looks so much like her...‹* I suddenly realize. Grandma gives me a big kiss on the cheek, hugs me again, a little tighter, and then pushes me away again, this time holding my hand.

“I’m so happy you’re finally here,” she begins, her voice hesitant. “I’ve waited so long for this…” she continues, but her voice is lost in the commotion that is just beginning around us.

A large group of young men and women, accompanied by children of varying ages, have formed a circle around us, and they all seem to be asking or saying something at once, unfortunately in the local dialect that neither I nor the communicator understand. Grandpa Jitu gives me a sly look and raises his right hand. Everyone immediately falls silent, so silent that I can hear my own breathing. Grandpa takes my left hand, raises it in the air, and says something that includes my name. As everyone starts talking again at once, he turns back to me.

“I just introduced you to all your second cousins and told them that you’ll greet them individually in a moment. But since you don’t speak our local dialect, they should probably address you in the more widely spoken language ‘mòoré,’ which is also understood by the translator,” he says, looking directly into my eyes the whole time.

Grandpa Jitu stands to my left and I look around awkwardly. I stop counting at twenty. Grandma squeezes my right hand so tightly that I have to briefly free myself and put my arm around her shoulder. Grandpa watches me closely, raises his hand again, and everyone falls silent.

“Yes, Mika, we are indeed quite a large family…” he begins, and I notice everyone smiling. “Here in Koti, you have thirty-four cousins of varying degrees, all of whom have never met you and are curious to get to know you…” I hear him say.

I feel my knees go weak and instinctively lean on Grandma Kyara's shoulder. She's no longer trembling, and suddenly I realize I can rely on her, quite literally. Grandpa Jitu lets go of my hand and gives a quick signal to a young man. He comes over to us, to me, and Grandpa introduces him. He's obviously the first in the long line that's growing ever longer behind him. I probably look very overwhelmed. I hear Grandma whispering softly in my ear.

“You have to go along with everything until you’ve been introduced to them, Mika. It’s our custom here, and anyone who hadn’t been introduced to you immediately today would feel left out…” she says, and immediately adds, anticipating my question, “…No, you don’t have to remember their names. Nobody expects that of you. You’ll all have plenty of time to chat over the next few days, and you might even get to know some of them better.”

She smiles and doesn't feel so fragile under my arm anymore. Her voice has also become stronger and more confident, even assertive. That's how I know her from our video calls. I'm overwhelmed by the number of new, smiling faces. I nod, shake hands, get kissed on the cheek, little boys reach into my pockets and tug at my pants, a girl gives me a wooden doll with a white flower…

I have tears in my eyes and I don't even know why. I've never met so many people before, all of whom are so eager to get to know me. The ceremony seems endless… my eyes wander from face to face and occasionally across the crowd behind them. I hear names I've never heard before and I'm so glad I don't have to memorize them. There's no way I could match the names to any faces.

I'm starting to feel overwhelmed by the situation, and a feeling of weakness is creeping over me. Grandpa Jitu and Grandma Kyara don't seem to mind, though. They smile and keep introducing me to my family, my very large family. Between a young boy and his mother, my eyes catch on another face. My heart suddenly starts pounding like crazy. There, in the distance, someone else is smiling directly at me, but in a completely different way.

It's Ferouse. She's standing at the edge of the marketplace in the shade of a kapok tree, leaning against its buttress roots, gazing intently in my direction. Next to her, I see Aidah and Kasim, engrossed in conversation. My hand is being squeezed by a tall man, and I can hear Grandpa Jitu's voice in my ear.

"Your uncle Ismael asks you how long you plan to stay in Koti..."

I look directly into the face of the tall man, obviously my mother's brother, since he's come so close I can't see anything else. He says something in a commanding voice, and I glance awkwardly at my grandfather, who then says something to this uncle that seems to calm him down and even makes him laugh. He pats me firmly on the shoulder, winks briefly, and then turns away again. Behind him, I hope to spot Ferouse again. But she's no longer where she was standing. In the shade of the kapok

tree, several older men are now standing, engaged in lively conversation.

This is all becoming a bit much for me, and I want to tell Grandpa Jitu. Another woman hugs me and walks on. I turn briefly to Grandpa and take his arm. But he immediately answers my unspoken request:

“We’ll be finished in a moment,” he says reassuringly, pointing in front of him where there is indeed only one other young man.

I shake one more hand, and then no one is standing in front of me. The market square is still full of people, and everyone is busy setting up tables and chairs and bringing dishes. It's slowly getting dark, and strings of lights are being switched on in the surrounding trees. All of this is happening away from me, and it feels like a dream. *›I must be really tired...‹* I think, and I don't know what to do with myself. I just want to sit down somewhere and have a drink. I feel a little dizzy...

"Mika, hey, are you okay?" I hear Grandpa Jitu ask me.

"Leave him alone, you..." Grandma Kyara replies, pulling on my hand. "Come on, Mika, let's go home first. You might want something to drink and rest a bit, wouldn't you?"

As if in a dream, I follow the two of them through the crowd in the marketplace. Someone is constantly smiling at me, hands pat me kindly on the shoulder or back, warm voices say something to me that feels good, even if I don't understand it. Once we leave the marketplace, we find ourselves in a small alleyway between the gardens surrounding the houses. Here, only the light of dusk remains, and after a few steps, the voices of the many people behind us fade away.

"Just a few more steps..." I hear Grandpa say.

"We're almost there..." adds Grandma, pulling on my hand, which she apparently doesn't want to let go of.

Grandpa walks a few steps ahead of us, with the gait of someone who's used to being in charge. At least, that's what I think when I see him walking like that. I adjust my backpack with my free hand; it's pressing down on my shoulder.

“It’s fine…”, I stammer, “I just felt a little uneasy with so many people…”, I say, without thinking anything of it.

Grandpa Jitu suddenly stops and looks at me in surprise.

"Feeling uneasy? Why? They're all your relatives... you knew they'd all come to

say hello, didn't you?"

I realize that my words are being misunderstood. The communicator's translation is apparently not very precise. I wonder if there's a way to improve this.

“Yes, of course…” I begin hastily, “I already knew they were all here. Only, it’s one thing to know that my local family is so large, and quite another to meet them all at once and experience them together…”

“Jitu, leave the child alone…” Grandma Kyara feels compelled to intervene.

“The child?” Grandpa Jitu looks at her indignantly. “The child is over eighteen and therefore already a young man who could even marry…” he states, standing with his legs wide apart in front of his wife and not even glancing at me. “But you’re right, Kyara…” he continues after a moment’s pause. “Mika is still a child, since he’s never had a mentor, like all of us in the great Dagara tradition, and has also never gone through the initiation ritual, as all our young people his age have already done…”

›Initiation ritual...?‹ All the alarm bells in my head seem to be ringing. I'd never been aware of any initiation ritual before. Besides, I know that the global transformation was only possible because of overcoming many old and traditional beliefs. The reason for this was, and is, that only with the recognition of humanity's role in the shared equilibrium of all life did a sustainable change in lifestyles become possible. I understand that there are still communities everywhere that haven't yet completed this journey, or that have developed their own forms of transformation, some of which even integrate the old beliefs. However, it never occurred to me that I would personally have anything to do with the traditions of the communities from which my mother also comes. *›That's not exactly what I expected...‹* the cautious voice in the back of my mind chimes in.

“Um…”, I try to raise my voice uncertainly.

Grandpa firmly raises his hand and takes two large steps towards me. He puts his arm around my shoulder and his eyes sparkle as he speaks again.

"Mika, you probably didn't know this, but in the next few days you will undergo the traditional initiation ritual of our community."

He says this as if I'm being given a special honor. However, I now feel more like I've been deliberately deceived.

“Exactly…” I venture to begin again, “…I didn’t know anything about that. What is

this initiation ritual all about?”

I can see that both Grandma and Grandpa are smiling at me, clearly amused, but I can't hide a certain amount of fear. Grandpa and Grandma exchange meaningful glances and nods, as if they've been expecting my reaction for a long time. Grandpa takes a deep breath before very slowly beginning his explanation.

“I don’t know if your mother told you anything about our culture and traditions here in Burkina Faso. She should know, because she also went through this initiation ritual at your age…”

“Well,” Grandma interjects, “not exactly the same one, because she’s a woman and…”

“Yes, Kyara, may I, please?” Grandpa looks at her firmly. “Yes, Mika, indeed, not the same ritual, because there are subtle differences between the initiation of women and men, but, broadly speaking, we’re talking about the shared culture and tradition of the Dagara tribes, who have lived in this region for many centuries. According to this tradition, every young person must undergo an initiation ritual to gain their place in their respective tribal community. To prepare for this, they are assigned a mentor, someone who has already gained experience and can offer guidance.”

Grandpa comes to my side and we walk again through the almost dark alley. Grandma follows two steps behind. Grandpa has a firm grip on me and slowly pushes me toward a small path between two bushes. A little further on, we can see the lit windows of a small house. The door is open, and we walk straight toward it. A few steps before it, Grandpa stops and continues to hold me. Grandma walks past us and into the house.

I can't say I'm completely comfortable with this. Sure, I read about initiation rituals during my studies, and when I was preparing for the trip, I also gathered some information about the history of West Africa and its people. But this has caught me completely off guard. Grandpa turns me to him and continues talking to me.

"Mika, you don't need to be afraid!"

"I'm not afraid..." I blurt out unintentionally.

"No, of course not," Grandpa smiles, "why would you be? Nothing will happen to you. I'm just surprised you're so surprised. Actually, we talked to your mother a long time ago about you coming here and, like she did in her day, going through the initiation ritual to be officially welcomed into our community. It's only natural, because

you're one of us, aren't you?" he beams at me.

"Yes, I don't know why either," I try to answer, "but Mom never told me anything about it, really..."

I feel like I've been caught completely off guard, and I can't explain it, because it's really not my fault. On top of that, I'm really curious about what my grandpa means by »initiation ritual«.

“I would really like to know more about it, I mean about what to expect and when, especially…” I add. “You know, Grandpa, I’m only here for three days and…”

“Jitu, leave the boy alone and please come inside… dinner’s on the table,” I hear Grandma’s voice thankfully through the open window.

“Yes, yes, we’re coming!” Grandpa replies, and then, as if he were revealing a secret Grandma shouldn’t know, “Don’t worry about the time, when, or how, Mika! Everything will be alright, you’ll see,” he concludes, his laughter ringing out cheerfully in the cool evening air.

◊ ◊ ◊

I'm lying on the guest bed and can still taste Grandma's delicious food. *›She cooks so differently than we do at home...‹* I think I can tell. *›Speaking of home...‹*

"Grandma, I'd like to get in touch with Leyla and Simon. Let's see if I can reach them."

"Yes, that's a good idea, Mika. I think they'd both like to know how you are..." says Grandma Kyara.

I'm trying to establish a connection with home. The picture is flickering, but nothing is recognizable or understandable.

"Come over here," Jitu calls to me, "the reception is better here."

Next to the kitchen in the living area, things suddenly work better and Simon's face can be seen.

"Mika!" he smiles at me. "So you've finally arrived in Koti!"

"Mika, are you all right?" asks Lares, who is just walking through the frame.

"Well, you've already met our little family," Mom beams at me.

"Everything's fine. As you can see, I'm finally here and overwhelmed by this really small family," I reply, feeling a warm pull in my heart. "My long journey, I can already

say, has led me here to my roots, which I hadn't really suspected yet."

"Ah, so Grandma and Grandpa have certainly done a good job of introducing you to everyone!" she adds, turning to Jitu and Kyara.

"Yes, everyone was very curious, and we're really proud of Mika..." Jitu replies, placing his hand on my shoulder.

“And the family welcomed him with open arms,” Kyara adds.

“But there’s one thing you could have told me before I left!” I say, a little unsure.

“What do you mean?” Leyla looks at me questioningly. “I already told you about the climate and the special clothing recommendations, and you already knew how large our extended family is from my stories, right?”

“Yes, that’s not what I mean. You could have at least said a few words about the ritual,” I reply defiantly.

“Yes, Mika, I could have. But you’ll draw your own conclusions. I’m quite sure of that,” she answers me, winking at Jitu. “Dad, please take good care of my Mika; I want him to come back safe and sound.”

Everyone except me bursts into loud laughter and Jitu pats me on the shoulder again.

"No problem, Leyla. Mika won't be hurt," he replies mischievously.

"We're just popping down to the market square now; the big family festival is about to start. Have a good time, and see you soon!" Grandma Kyara says goodbye.

"Love to the whole family!" Leyla waves to us.

"Mika, please keep us updated..." Simon adds.

"Um, Mika? Ajola ran into me yesterday and asked how you were," Lares says, holding his head up to the camera and looking meaningful. "But I didn't tell her anything!" he adds cautiously.

"Thanks a lot, little brother, as I've come to expect from you," I reply and end the call.

A flood of memories is overwhelming me right now. I realize that I haven't thought about Ajola at all in the last few days, that she hasn't been present in my thoughts, as she usually is. Suddenly, I see her face before me and hear her voice, just like when we last spoke. It seems like so much time has passed, so much has happened. *›Don't kid yourself, son,‹* I hear my inner voice, *›...you know perfectly well that only*

Ferouse »happened«, nothing else! ...Right?‹ My inner voice is right, I can't deny that. However, the feeling I'm experiencing right now is too complex and confusing to process in this way. I've traveled thousands of kilometers, seemingly to the other side of the world...and then one word from my brother is enough to instantly transport me back home. I feel very clearly that Ajola means something to me, something I feel in my heart, something that has been with me in the background all along, something that never truly disappeared, even though we literally lost sight of each other. But now, inside me, Ajola isn't the only one... she shares that space with Ferouse, and I have to finally admit that to myself. Now, before I meet either of them again... or hurt either of them.

Family Celebration

Evening at the Market Square

We walk together towards the market square. Small, colorful lamps and lanterns hang in the trees and on the houses. Grandpa and Grandma are now wearing brightly colored clothes, as are many of the other elderly people we meet along the way. The square is even more crowded than before, when I was introduced to the family. There is loud, all-over chatter. Laughter, clapping, and singing mingle with the sounds of drums, xylophones, flutes, and stringed instruments. Men and women play in a circle, standing and sitting. And their laughter is exuberant and joyful.

I hear music, the way my mother sometimes plays and dances to it. With each drum-beat, the music becomes increasingly intense. Everyone here moves to the same rhythm, like a single being, both playing the music and dancing to it. The people's eyes radiate a contentment I've never experienced before in this intensity. And yet, I know it; I can feel it right now, even if I can't yet pinpoint its source or what causes it.

I notice that the rhythm is increasingly taking hold of me. I'm amazed at how naturally my body moves with the music. I savor every note and am inwardly fascinated by the variety of sounds and the pulsating drums.

Grandpa stays by my side, and I feel him gently guiding me through the crowd. Grandma has disappeared; I can no longer see her. My eyes slowly adjust to the vi-brant colors, and I begin to recognize individual faces. I look for Kasim, Aidah, and Ferouse, but I can't find them anywhere.

A long, narrow table is lined with jars full of drinks. I take a mug and sip a large gulp. The liquid tingles on my tongue, and soon I feel a pleasant warmth spreading through my body. *›Is this an alcoholic drink?‹* I wonder, and am about to take another big gulp, but Grandpa stops me.

"Slowly, slowly, Mika..." I hear him beside me as he gently pushes my hand down and I set the cup down. "I don't know if you're used to drinking something like this..." he says, winking at me. "This is our magic potion, something like a medicine that

makes time disappear and promotes merriment. That's why it has to be enjoyed slowly and carefully."

"I've drunk alcohol before..." I reply briefly, but I already sense that the potion's effect is somewhat different from what I expected. "Um... and what exactly is in this magic potion, please?"

Grandpa looks at me calmly and smilingly, then looks around as if he wants to make sure that nobody is watching or eavesdropping on us, and says with a serious expression:

"I can't tell you that yet, my boy. That's reserved only for official members of our family community. You understand. It's a secret..."

I can see he's enjoying teasing me, but I'm not annoyed at all. I feel fantastic right now. I don't think I've ever felt this good. I'd love another sip, but given how intensely my body is reacting to this drink, I think I'll be careful. I really don't know what else might happen, and if I can't be prepared for everything, I at least want to be able to take in whatever might come my way. Grandpa obviously understands my dilemma.

"Very sensible, Mika. The decision always remains with you, but I already see in you the main characteristics of our family bond: We're all sensible!" he says, patting me firmly on the back.

"Perhaps too sensible, sometimes at least..." I hear Grandma's voice behind me.

I turn around. Standing before me again is the tall man who resembles my mother and whom I was briefly introduced to earlier.

"Mika, do you remember Ismael?" Grandpa asks.

"Of course!" I say, holding out my hand. "Hello Ismael, you're my mother's brother, aren't you?"

Ismael smiles, shakes my hand firmly, and addresses me in the local dialect. Grandpa interrupts him.

"Mika can't understand you like this, Ismael. You should speak to him in »French« or »mòoré«, then the communicator will help you. Our dialect, »fulfulde«, hasn't been included in the multilingual database yet."

"Forgive me, Mika, it should work better now, I hope," says Ismael in a familiar-sounding singsong, which now seems to be translated.

He looks at me, clearly amused. I realize I'm grinning from ear to ear. *›That must be*

the drink...‹ I clear my throat and try to appear a bit more serious.

"Yes, I understand you perfectly now, thank you."

"That's good. I see you've already become familiar with our customs... how do you like it here, Mika?"

This question catches me completely off guard.

"Um... yeah, well, I'm still figuring things out, getting to know everything... so much is so unfamiliar and yet familiar at the same time... I think I need a little more time..." I mumble to myself.

"That was to be expected," Ismael says. "I was in Europe once too, where, like you here, I participated in a technical project. The beginning was very unusual for me as well, even though, probably like you, I had done extensive research beforehand on MultiNet... But I have good news for you!" he smiles at me again. "I've been chosen by our family to mentor you during the initiation ritual, and that certainly means I can answer some of the questions you probably have right now."

I suspect I must look very wide-eyed right now. *›Yes, there was something else, wasn't there...‹*

“Yes, thank you…” I try to gain my footing, “Grandpa already told me something about that earlier… I really don’t know anything about this ritual and…”

“…You feel uneasy when you think about it?” Ismael continues my sentence.

“Yes, exactly, I…”

“There’s still time for that,” I hear Ismael’s reassuring voice. “Your situation is a bit different than usual for the young people who live here anyway. I’ll tell you everything you need to know tomorrow, and you’ll see, there’s nothing to be afraid of,” he says, looking meaningfully at Grandpa Jitu. “I mean, no matter what some of our elders might have told you about it so far…” he concludes with a smile.

I look into his eyes and can feel that everything he says to me is sincere and that I can trust him. I already like him a lot, even though I've only known him for a few minutes. I just realized that Grandpa and Grandma had left and only Ismael was still by me. It's a very new sensation. We're in the middle of a large crowd of people, all talking loudly, singing, dancing, eating, and drinking at the same time, and I feel as if Ismael and I are completely alone. Everything else is somehow muffled by his presence and seems distant, like a theatrical backdrop on a stage where we both play the

leading roles. *›That's probably why Ismael was chosen to be my mentor...‹* I surmise.

“Thanks for the reassuring words, Ismael. But you’ll understand that all of this is still far too overwhelming for me right now…”

“Mika, tonight we’ll all relax and celebrate together. Only tomorrow, after a good night’s sleep, will we address what you still need to know. It’s not much, but everything is important. You need a clear head and a calm, open heart for this. I suggest we meet here tomorrow, shortly after sunrise.”

“Okay, that’s a plan,” I say, a little impatiently, “but there’s one thing you have to tell me tonight…”

“Yes, go ahead…”

“Do you do this often? I mean… being a mentor?”

"Yes and no. »Often« is a relative term. Yes, I have taken on this role for several young men. No, I'm not the only one. All the adults in the family are always available for selection, meaning everyone who has undergone the initiation ritual themselves and therefore possesses the necessary experience. The choice is always made based on the initiate's personality, as the mentor must be a good fit to the initiate... and, to answer your unanswered question: Young men always get a male mentor, young women always a female one. Despite all the similarities, as you've surely noticed in your life, there are some important differences between the gender-specific approaches, which require specific experience and preparation."

As he speaks, Ismael also places his right hand on my shoulder, just as Grandpa had done. This seems to create a sense of familiarity. A familiarity that I find very appealing. I perceive the touch as reassuring, supportive, even protective.

“Thank you, that makes everything a bit clearer for me…” I reply, my gaze drifting far away over Ismael’s shoulder, to the edge of the brightly lit and crowded square.

“You’re welcome, Mika,” Ismael leans back towards me.

He is half a head taller, and his broad shoulders momentarily block my view, just as I think I see Kasim and Aidah under one of the kapok trees. Ismael follows my gaze and smiles warmly at me.

"I see you're already looking for your friends. That's exactly what you should be doing now. Have fun. See you tomorrow morning. Remember not to drink too much of that magic potion," he adds slyly, and then suddenly he's gone.

With his disappearance, the muted atmosphere I felt around us both is shattered, and the full roar of the revelers instantly deafens my ears. I can now see clearly again what is happening around me. And in the distance, Kasim, Aidah, and Ferouse are also standing there.

I cross the square and walk towards the three of them. The loud music, and especially the rhythm of the drums, fills my entire body. I happily let myself be swept away and weave my way through the dancing crowd. Aidah and Kasim are lost in their own world and don't notice me approaching. Ferouse, on the other hand, smiles cheerfully at me, and her gaze instantly captures me. Her graceful movements mirror my own. I approach her, and she takes my hands. As if by instinct, we begin to dance together. It feels like a dream. We touch each other, but our contact remains vague, almost unreal. What feels very real, however, is the synchronized movement of our bodies, which seem to be connected by our eyes.

Suddenly, everything around us becomes quieter. A much slower song begins to play, sounding like a farewell. The instruments are barely audible, and all voices are lowered. The onlookers clap their hands and call out words to the musicians. The musicians stand up in rows and bow slightly without interrupting their playing. They finish the song, and the singing of the onlookers falls silent. They put down their instruments and join the crowd, where they are warmly welcomed with hugs and pats on the back.

"The first day of the festival is drawing to a close," Ferouse says to me.

"Already? I thought the celebration would continue uninterrupted for the next few days. I'm just getting into the spirit..." I say, without letting go of her hands.

Ferouse continues to look into my eyes, her hands still resting in mine. They feel incredibly warm and supple. The pressure is firm, but not tight. It feels like her hands are nestling into mine. It's a new experience for me to perceive this sensation so intensely and clearly. She leans towards me and speaks in a soft voice.

"We no longer party like we used to, until the early hours of the morning, if only out of respect for the many creatures that live around us and would be disturbed too much... and tomorrow is a new day when we will party again. Isn't that the case in Europe? Do you still party so long and so loudly all night long there?"

Her question surprises me.

“Um, no, not really. But I thought that here…”

“…Where people are so different, even the celebrations must still be very extreme…”, she adds to my thought with an ironic look in her eyes.

›Caught red-handed, what can I say...‹ I realize.

“No… I mean, it’s such an important family celebration…” I begin to talk myself into a corner.

Ferouse's hands suddenly hold me very tightly, and she comes so close that I can feel her breath on my face.

“Mika, we’re all children of the environment we grew up in, aren’t we? I never would have thought that a young man from Europe could move so gracefully while dancing…” she continues with a smile. “Obviously you’ve tried some of our special drink, haven’t you?” she adds, laughing.

›I'm thrilled? ... is that what I'm feeling right now? ...‹ The way she treats me leaves me speechless and also relieves me.

"Yes, why?" I ask, laughing loudly. "I've never been able to dance like this before."

"Yes, I could tell," says Ferouse. "It's wonderful to see that you've been able to connect with our traditions so quickly..."

"Drinking and dancing are part of our celebrations," I hear Aidah say, who is now standing next to us with Kasim. "It's lovely that we're invited to celebrate with you. Thank you!"

"So you obviously enjoyed it, Mika," Kasim says happily. "I love our family celebrations. They're simply the most beautiful thing our communities have to offer."

Aidah takes Kasim by the hand and they both disappear back into the crowd of onlookers.

"But what's the deal with the magic potion?" I ask Ferouse again, looking at her questioningly.

"Magic potion?" she replies, looking at me questioningly as well.

"Yes, my grandfather told me, when I wanted to drink the first cup quickly, that I should take it slow with the magic potion, otherwise..."

Ferouse bursts into a bell-clear laugh and tilts her head back as she gently pushes me along in front of her. *›She looks enchanting...‹* a thought creeps into my mind.

"And you believed all of that?" she asks, barely able to contain herself. "Old Jitu

was always a joker. Magic potion! That's really good!" she continues laughing, and I don't know where to go or how to escape quickly. "Jitu's magic potion is a light palm wine, which is usually served as a drink at such celebrations here. Obviously, you enjoyed it, and its mildly euphoric effect helped your body achieve the necessary suppleness..." she finally says in a somewhat calmer voice.

For a moment, we stand there, simply looking at each other. She takes my hand and leads me to an empty bench under a kapok tree in a more distant corner of the square. We sit down, and I watch as the crowd slowly disperses, heading home in all directions. Some of the strings of lights are switched off, leaving only a few very pale lanterns to illuminate the paths.

We sit for a while at the edge of the now almost empty festival grounds. Ferouse turns to me, looking at me with a more serious expression than before.

“Mika,” she suddenly speaks very quietly, “I’ve only known you for a few days, but I’ve taken you to my heart and believe that we share a deep friendship…”

I'm speechless and my mouth feels dry. Ferouse just keeps surprising me. I have absolutely no idea what to say. Everything that comes to mind sounds flat and totally awkward. Despite that, I realize I feel comfortable. Her presence has an incredibly calming effect on me. No matter what she says, I don't feel any irritation, nor do I feel uncomfortable around her. *›Uncharted territory, Mika! Extreme caution is advised here...‹* a few warning bells ring in the back of my mind. Ferouse continues to look directly at me, and I can't tear my eyes away from hers. I know she expects me to say something. I just don't know what…

“I feel the same way…”, I hear my voice and see Ferouse’s eyes glitter as she hears my words.

The lanterns are switched off and it suddenly becomes dark. Only the moonlight bathes the landscape around us in a faint twilight. Ferouse lets go of my hand and stands up.

"It's time for bed, young man!" she says firmly, and I can feel her smiling at me. "Since we'll only be here for two more days, this short time will be very tiring, especially for you."

"Yes," I reply, and I get up as well. "I suppose I'll need to rest before everything that awaits me begins..." I add, and then I don't know how to say goodbye to her properly.

Ferouse, on the other hand, seems to know exactly what to do. She comes to me, hugs me, and holds me tight until I feel confident enough to hug her in return. For a moment, I feel as if our bodies have become one. A moment of intense awareness, unlike anything I've ever experienced before. And then it's over. She's gone so quickly that I can't even say which way she went. I'm still numb and realize once again that this is all completely new, that I've never experienced such closeness before.

I try to remember the way to my grandparents' house. My legs move as if of their own accord. I'm lost in thought about something I can't yet clearly grasp. And then, briefly, this thought flashes through my mind: *›Ajola…‹*

Admission to the Community

"Mika, a beautiful new day is dawning!" I hear Grandma's cheerful voice.

"Yes, yes, I'm already awake..." I stammer and get up.

My body still feels like an oversized pair of pajamas, and I'm trying to shed it with stretches and yawns. It's already light, but the sun is still hiding behind the trees. Jitu and Kyara are sitting at the dining table. Kyara has prepared breakfast for us. I sit down opposite Jitu and look at him seriously.

“Palm wine, that was the magic potion…”, I say to him and have to laugh out loud.

Kyara pretends she didn't hear anything. Jitu laughs and bangs loudly on the table. I bite into a banana and drink some water.

"You seem to have tolerated our drink well," Jitu says, looking at me calmly. "Don't keep Ismael waiting too long," he adds, glancing towards the garden where the back of a man is visible through the window.

I grab my jacket and say goodbye to both of them with a quick nod. The man in the garden isn't Ismael, though, but the neighbor, who's simply sitting on a bench. On my way to the market square, I encounter more people who greet me warmly. Everyone is quiet and doesn't seem to be in any hurry at all. After all, the day is just beginning for everyone. On a bench under one of the trees in the market square, I see Ismael sitting. When he recognizes me, he gets up and hugs me firmly and resolutely, as seems to be the custom here. For a moment, he holds me by the shoulders and looks directly and deeply into my eyes.

"Did you sleep well, Mika?" he asks, gesturing that we should follow the main road.

"Yes, actually surprisingly well..." I reply, still uncertain. "And you?" I ask back, out of habit.

I notice Ismael watching me from the side as I walk. It almost feels like an inspection, as if he's assessing whether I could handle what he has planned for me. *›...Well, that's a bit paranoid, isn't it?‹*

“Yes, I slept well too…” Ismael replies, then quickly adds, “I’m only asking because you had a very exciting day yesterday. And then the palm wine, which you’re not used to… it might have been that your sleep wasn’t so restful…”

His voice remains calm. We've almost reached the end of the road and are passing the last houses and gardens, heading towards a small grove that just appears on the left side of the road. There, in the shade of the trees, I see some tree stumps. The sun is now bright in the sky and the temperature is rising noticeably. I probably won't need my jacket. Ismael is only wearing trousers and a yellow T-shirt and doesn't have a jacket with him.

“Is it important that I’m fit right now?” I can’t help asking.

Ismael smiles mischievously.

“What do you think is going to happen to you?” he asks back, but he doesn’t even wait for me to answer. “There are a lot of thoughts going through your head right now, aren’t there? A lot is still unknown to you, and you might be feeling uncertain about what’s going to happen, is that right?”

›Yes, somehow...‹ I think, and realize that I'm only thinking it, but not saying it out loud.

“Yes, somehow,” I repeat aloud. “It all surprised me a lot, the initiation ritual and the fact that I need a mentor… I wasn’t prepared for that…” I blurt out.

Ismael sits down on one of the tree stumps and, with a short but clear hand gesture, indicates that I should sit on the tree stump in front of him.

"I can sense your unease and even a little mistrust, Mika. That's normal in a situation like this, especially since you didn't grow up here. Young people who do grow up here learn from the constant activity in the village what events they will encounter on their life's journey. They playfully prepare for them and even eagerly await these

events. There aren't tests to be passed, but rather confirmations of the maturity reached in order to be fully accepted into the community. Every person will be accepted into the community, but only when they themselves become reasonably aware of who they are and what they want to accomplish during their next steps, for themselves and implicitly also for the community in which they live."

As he speaks, Ismael looks me straight in the eye. It's just like last night on the village square. I feel like I'm in a bubble, like I'm in a cocoon, just him and me… and he's talking to me. This intensity of a conversation is new to me, and while I don't feel bad, I'm not entirely comfortable either.

“Wait, please…”, I murmur briefly, trying to shake off the trance-like state.

Ishmael stops speaking and waits. He turns his gaze away from me and looks into the distance. I take one or two deep breaths and try to collect my thoughts.

“Something strange happens to me when you talk to me like that… do you know what I mean?” I ask him for help.

“Yes, please forgive me. That was my mistake. I mentioned that you didn't grow up here, and yet I'm treating you like one of us,” Ismael says, glancing at me only briefly this time. “People born and raised here have a very strong energetic connection with each other and with all the other beings that surround us and together with us form the cycle of life. Therefore, much of our communication takes place without words, on a level that cannot be grasped by the mind. This, as you may now be beginning to suspect, is also part of this spiritual development that formed the basis for the Great Transformation. This kind of energetic communication and perception is, of course, known all over the world. But in regions where alienation from civilization wasn't as pronounced even before the Transformation, this kind of perception was never completely forgotten. That's why it's so strong in our region now, indeed, has even become more the norm, compared, for example, to regions in the northern hemisphere…”

I'm calm now, I realize. My unconscious fear of the unknown is still there, but it's just one color in a rich spectrum of feelings currently flooding through me. Ismael still only glances at me occasionally as he continues talking.

"Therefore, please don't take everything I try to convey literally. We're also dealing with the multiple disadvantages of translated communication. I'm speaking in a language that isn't my first language, and you're listening through the communicator. It's

quite possible that what I mean won't reach you with the same meaning to the same extent. After all, it also depends on your own experience how you interpret my words and their meaning. A delicate matter, this linguistic communication, isn't it?" Ismael says, looking at me with a smile. "That's why I addressed you directly on an energetic level, intuitively and without regard for your background or experience. You probably noticed this, since it's unfamiliar to you. I should have warned you beforehand and asked your permission to interact with you in this way. Please forgive me," he concludes, looking me directly in the eyes once more.

I'm deeply moved right now. I can sense that Ismael is being honest with me and that I can trust him. And yet, I'm aware of his difficult situation. He has the task of explaining the integration process into the local community to someone who is essentially a stranger, and guiding him through the entire procedure in just one day.

"Um..." I clear my throat briefly before speaking, "...thank you for the explanation. I can tell myself that this is a very difficult situation for both of us. You don't need to apologize to me. I never felt inappropriately treated by you, and I can only acknowledge your attempt to communicate with me in this way. It worked. Now that I also know what's going on, I want to try not to make it even harder for you to prepare me for this ceremony..."

›*...Wasn't that a bit too obvious?*‹ a dissatisfied thought whispers in my head. Ismael continues to look at me calmly, and for a few seconds, perhaps minutes, we both remain silent. A light, but already quite warm, breeze rustles through the canopy above us. A bird chirps nearby, and crickets can also be heard. Ismael looks into the distance again, and I think I can sense that he's gathering himself to continue speaking. Now that we're both sitting on the tree stumps, we're not so different in height anymore. He's relaxed, but with a straight back and both feet firmly planted on the ground. I can see his chest rising and falling with his breathing. I reflexively adjust my hunched posture and wait. Suddenly, he looks directly at me again and speaks softly to me.

“Our community, like many other indigenous communities around the world, has carried some traditional customs into this new era. Not everything that was previously addressed through different forms of religiosity in the sense of a spiritual life was bad, or that needed to be overcome. Recognizing the spiritual path of a conscious being naturally includes all the experiences that lead to it. Our centuries-old animistic cul-

ture has always emphasized the connection between people, their families, the village community, and all the animals and plants of their environment, and organized our way of life on this basis. Through this transformation, what our ancestors had always sensed and applied as guiding principles has been implicitly confirmed, at least for our people. This is why it remains very important in our region that everything takes place in the public sphere of the village community. Initiation, marriage, conception, birth, separation, and death—all the essential aspects of every life take place within the intimate connection of individuals with the community. The community arises from individuals who know their purpose in life and supports them on their personal journeys. The self-commitment of every adult individual is dedicated to the community in which they live. Individual and community are like two sides of the same coin. The same applies, in a broader sense, to families. A community arises from families, which are always supported by the community.

"It's very similar in Europe as well. Community is paramount, but love and marriage are rather a very personal and intimate matter..." I say somewhat embarrassedly.

“There are indeed significant differences between Europe and Africa, Mika. In our culture, relationships are based on the principle that they are not solely private, but rather play a crucial role in the community, and vice versa. Happy relationships—and I'm not necessarily talking only about marriage and family—have an impact on the community, and we support this happiness. Yes, and problems in any kind of relationship, whether within the family or among friends, also become problems for the community. We resolve such problems together, not, as was common practice in Europe in the past, through couples therapy. It's an experience our people gained long before the Transformation that community processes can also have a healing effect on couple relationships when they are conducted honestly, with mutual trust, and not for self-interest,” he continues.

“This difference, I mean, the fact that this has been known here for so long, was something I wasn’t aware of to this extent, Ismael. But perhaps it explains the serenity and deep connection between the people here…,” I confirm.

“Mika, I sense you’re now mature enough, at least intuitively, to know what community can mean in this deeper sense. That’s why your path has led you straight to us. Jitu has often told us about you, and I’m also in contact with my sister Leyla, your mother, quite frequently. Even though you and I haven’t spoken yet, I’ve always

wanted to meet you in person. That I've now been chosen to be your mentor is a coincidence, but a very welcome one," he says with a joyful smile.

"I actually suspected that the choice wasn't random at all…" I reply.

"Oh, yes. With our large family here, I definitely wasn't the only one in the running. It's a lottery system we use. All the adults who feel ready to take on this responsibility participate. I can certainly tell you that I wasn't expecting it," he adds.

"But what about this initiation ritual? What's it all about?" I venture to ask directly.

"It is a ritual in which young people consciously experience being accepted as part of a community because of who they are. Our ancient traditions held that every person has a specific purpose to fulfill in their life, that every person, simply by existing in the world, brings a unique wisdom which they offer as a gift to the community. The ritual allows the young person to reveal their inner being to the community and to connect with the community's energy field as a responsible adult. This connection is made to extend their own wisdom and awareness with and around the community, to support it and to receive support from it. The adult individual thus consciously becomes an integral part of the community, in order to extend their wisdom into the entire universe with the help of the community. It is the ritual of the transition of the young person, who has been nurtured by the community, to the adult who consciously commits to the community. And here, we are not only referring to the community of people, but to the universal community of all life within the implicit common equilibrium."

"Aha…", I manage to say after I have closed my mouth again.

Ismael's gaze is very focused on me. I can even feel it physically, even though he's a few steps away, sitting as we are. He makes a brief, holding gesture with his hand when he realizes I want to continue talking.

"Mika, I understand that all of this must be a lot for you. You don't need to say anything, and above all, please don't try to process everything logically with your mind. The energetic communication you're experiencing right now allows the transmission of knowledge that far exceeds the capacity of the mind. You most likely sense intuitively that much of what I'm telling you right now resonates with you, or rather, much of it seems familiar, is that right?" he asks briefly.

I can only offer a brief nod of agreement. The atmosphere around us, I feel, seems to prevent any logical thought from taking hold. Nevertheless, I'm experiencing an inner

clarity that admittedly astonishes me. *›Brainwashing?...‹* my safety mechanism in the back of my mind chimes in. Ismael is obviously watching me very closely.

"You are surely aware that during the Transformation, much was written about the actual spiritual development of consciousness able beings. You will recall that trustfulness, humbleness, and dedication were identified as the three important pillars of spiritual development..."

›Oh yes, there was something still... but that goes without saying...‹ sounds the attempt at justification. But Ismael continues speaking.

“The first hurdle on every human’s spiritual path is placing their trust in the people around them…” he says, earnestly yet smiling. “We would never have arrived here, indeed, the »Great Transformation« would never have taken place, if our ancestors hadn’t found the courage within themselves to trust one another unconditionally, wouldn’t they?”

His gaze rests on my eyes. His face smiles. I feel a comforting warmth throughout my body, and at the same time, an inner urge to run away. But he's right. If I don't trust him, then nothing makes sense.

“I sense the struggle within you, Mika, and you will soon realize that this struggle is an important step in your own development. Every human must take this step in their own life. Every human must find within themselves the trust they can give to all others. You must choose this path, and all initiation rituals in this world, including those of our people, are a practical way to consciously experience this with the support of the community,” he adds before turning his gaze away from me again.

I feel a certain relief in the spreading silence. But I'm fully engaged and know that I want to know more and am ready to go further. Further than I would have thought possible yesterday. Nothing Ismael tells me is actually new. Only the way he says it and the way he interacts with me is a completely new experience for me. I dare to speak to him.

"I feel like I'm somehow ready for something I haven't experienced before. And yes, I know I can trust you and everyone here, and yet there's something inside me, like a threshold, that still scares me to cross. To be honest, one thing has been on my mind the whole time. Will we, will I, have enough time to perform this ritual? I mean, I'm only here until tomorrow..." I hear my voice suddenly rising in pitch, as if I'm starting to panic.

"There's no rush, Mika. There's nothing to miss, and there's no achievement you need to accomplish for the ritual. You're already here; you already know everything you need to know. Starting today, you'll be able to choose to remember everything even more consciously... and the community, including your family, will support you. It's a long journey, and you're only at the beginning. This family celebration in Koti is just one stop; many more will follow..."

Silence falls between us once more. I suddenly feel thirsty and hungry. I have no idea how much time has passed. And I feel very good. I feel safe and at peace, more so than I have in a long time. One question, however, keeps resurfacing.

"You mentioned that family life, even intimate relationships between members of a community, are considered a public matter for the community, and…" I begin, but Ismael interrupts me.

“I was wondering when you’d ask this question, Mika,” he smiles at me. “I observed how you interacted with the young woman, Ferouse, I believe. And how she interacted with you. Everyone saw it last night. It was obvious to all of us here. Without a doubt, a tender bond already connects you. However, there’s something you absolutely must consider. Here, too, we understand that intimacy is primarily guided by spiritual forces. In Europe, to my knowledge and limited experience, it’s somewhat different. In Europe, intimacy tends to implicitly stem from erotic attraction, or how do you see it? I assume that at your age, you’ve already had some experience with this, haven’t you?” he asks, looking at me expectantly.

“I’m a bit confused by these distinctions, Ismael. Doesn’t erotic attraction flow into spiritual power?” I ask haltingly, because the way Ismael introduced the question surprised me.

“Yes, it does. However, in Europe it often seems to remain merely the satisfaction of erotic attraction, whereas here, erotic intimacy only truly arises when the spiritual bond between two people has been consciously recognized. That is to say, two people recognize that together, at least for a time, they can and should form a unity that is not only meant to serve them on an erotic level, but is also oriented towards the shared spiritual development of the couple and the community in which they live. Can you comprehend that, Mika?”

I need to let all of this sink in for a few moments.

"Does that mean no sex before marriage, or how am I supposed to understand

that? Where I come from, it's a generally accepted custom to explore sexuality with partners of the same age, consensually and with the necessary use of contraception, once you reach a certain age. And yes, I've already had those experiences..." I blurt out somewhat rashly. "Um, I mean, even if it was less than you might imagine..." I try to clarify my statement.

Ishmael looks very seriously into my eyes.

"You mean you have a girlfriend in Europe with whom you've had sex?" he asks, and I can feel his probing gaze very clearly. "Not that this is a bad thing, please don't misunderstand me!" he immediately softens his question. "I just want to protect you from mistakes that can be very painful. That's, among other things, my job as your mentor," he adds.

›Oh dear, this is like a mini interrogation, isn't it...? He caught me out...‹ I muse briefly. I don't feel guilty about his somewhat direct question, but I think I can guess why he's asking. I've been asking myself these questions lately, but not in this way or with this intensity.

"Yes, we're talking about honesty and trust. So I want to be honest with you, Ismael. I am indeed feeling a bit lost right now. Yes, I have a girlfriend in Europe, back home, so to speak, and yes, we've become very close... and yes again, I like Ferouse a lot, and I can well imagine, and would even like to, become very close to her too... I gather from your question that European behavior isn't quite right in this context and that you want to warn me against starting a relationship with Ferouse as long as I still have a girlfriend in Europe... is that the reason for your question and warning?"

This time, Ismael lets some time pass before answering me. He looks directly at me the whole time and seems completely focused on his very perception of me. I remain calm and clear-headed, and I wait. Suddenly, he taps his knees with both hands and says firmly:

"Yes, exactly. Very good! You're ready. Now we can get down to brass tacks!"

His face beams at me with satisfaction. I feel satisfied and confident too. Something is beginning, and I'm curious and slightly tense.

◊ ◊ ◊

The water is cool and tastes somewhat sweet. I suspect that the flavor is just a result

of the palm wine I drank yesterday. But I don't really care. I'm enjoying drinking it while lying here in the shade. The last few hours with Ismael were very intense and very interesting at the same time. Perhaps that's why I'm a bit worn out. I need to learn to cope as best I can with the many details of what's going to happen this afternoon and evening.

Ismael presented the meaning of the rite of passage from the perspective of the local communities. The insights into the local understanding of the personal path of spiritual development are very valuable to me, because through my family I also feel a sense of belonging here, not just in Europe.

The deeply felt, mutual dependence between the individual and the community is not new to me. However, it is lived out somewhat differently in Europe. The differences and similarities intertwine. The importance of the spiritual connection in one-on-one relationships also makes sense. It all resonates with me and seems familiar.

I feel the need to incorporate some of Ethan's thoughts as well, at least those relating to »shared equilibrium«. The communicator needs a while to find the entries.

> *June 18, 2040*
>
> *Today we submitted our latest census to the working group for monitoring population trends. There is now a simple website that lists all of the many thousands of communities worldwide. For our Walzbachtal community, a total of forty-six people are now listed, including thirty-two adults, two teenagers, and twelve children. Only one person has died since the last census.*
>
> *An initial assessment of global population trends indicates that the number of newborns continues to decline and cannot offset the number of deaths. The world population is estimated at approximately 2.4 billion, with a continuing downward trend. A sharp decline is particularly noticeable in the regions of the former Western world. This is likely due, in part, to the drastic loss of material prosperity and comfort that many people have apparently been unable to cope with. Furthermore, significant to complete depopulation of major urban areas has been reported. The vast majority of survivors are located in rural areas and are organized in small village communities.*

Those who view the decline in population density as a negative development and prefer to prioritize humanity above all else will not be able to draw any positive conclusions from these figures. From my perspective, however, this finding holds the unparalleled potential for the renewal and further development of our species, and from this point of view, I find it positive and hopeful.

It's also positive that this year's vegetable and fruit harvests are quite good, meaning everyone in our community will have enough to eat, even if there won't be an abundance. Our first bee colony has now also found its hive in the community garden.

Even more important to me these days, however, is the extensive and intensive discussion surrounding the definition of actual human needs. This is happening in communities around the world, in online forums, and in radio conferences. Even more importantly, it is taking place on the basis of the principle of the shared equilibrium of all life. It is recognized that humanity's new way of life must not consume more space and energy than is actually needed. However, a universally accepted definition of what constitutes »actual needs« has yet to be found. It will certainly take more time and further coordination before a global, at least fundamental, consensus can be reached.

For the past week, our community has been experimentally determining its own actual needs based on the principle of the common equilibrium of all life. There is much intensive discussion about ways to meet these needs without harming other beings.

Opinions and feelings within the community are somewhat divided. Adina, and I as well, are committed to organizing a joint dialogue on this topic with all community members. Many fear that the undertaking wouldn't be feasible and that it would necessitate even more compromises in diet and quality of life. Initially, this change may indeed feel that way. But any comprehensive change feels strange and threatening at first, especially when cherished traditions and comforts are challenged and threatened with destruction.

I find it significant for our time that solidarity and support agreements

have been negotiated in most regions of the world between numerous neighboring communities. A process is slowly emerging that has now been named the »honeycomb principle of communities«. The participating communities are seen as the nodes of a network whose meshes take on honeycomb-like forms, while the lines of the mesh represent the communication and transport routes between the communities. In this way, every community would, in principle, always be surrounded by three direct neighboring communities. From the perspective of a community in need, there would therefore be three direct neighboring communities that could provide support, even at short notice, due to the short distances involved, if help were requested. This shows that mutual dependence is being recognized more and more clearly, and also that survival alone will definitely become increasingly difficult compared to the relative security provided by the network of nearest neighboring communities.

I was also able to discuss this with Zanga. I'm so glad we have radio contact! His views, from the perspective of a people who had to survive in deep poverty for centuries, are very valuable in the context of a dialogue about essential necessities. They provide a corrective counterpoint to the standard of living here in Germany. Of course, religious aspects also play a role, and these can still be important today.

I also asked Noram about it and he said that in Rachidas' community the view of what is actually necessary for life seems to be very much influenced by the Abrahamic faith, i.e., by monotheism.

September 12, 2040

It happened exactly as I had feared.

Religions are a milestone in the spiritual development of a species of consciousness able beings like ourselves. Religions have their place, and overcoming them is one of the most important trials of all.

Discussions about the shared equilibrium of all life and the role and co-responsibility of humans within this shared context are being in-

tensely challenged by many religious groups. Fundamentalist representatives of the Abrahamic religions, in particular, view the equality of humans with all other living beings as a form of »blasphemy«. The bone of contention is the monotheistic claim that, according to »divine commandments«, humans have the right to control everything on this planet and therefore are entitled to exploit all its resources.

Fortunately, there are also other people within these same groups and communities. People who, in their spiritual development, have transcended this level of religion and can empathetically help build the necessary bridge for shared understanding and communal growth. Here I am specifically referring to people like Zanga and Jitu, but also Rachida. I am delighted to note that Rachida is far more spiritually mature than I had imagined back in Casablanca.

Zanga, Jitu, and I have been discussing at length over the past few weeks whether, from a Muslim perspective, it is acceptable that humankind does not occupy a special position in the shared balance of all life, but is merely an equal link in the chain. They largely agree with me, as they see no real contradiction with their religious beliefs. I hear something similar in my conversations with Rachida, although she has a less intense religious background. What they all share is a very vague concept of »the one God«, which comes very close to the idea of a constantly shifting and all-encompassing energy context. This also opens their eyes to the idea that this all-encompassing energy context did not intentionally create humankind »in its own image«, but simply includes it, as well as all other beings, as equals…

Every time I think about it, I experience the impossibility of a consistent description, as if I were trying to draw the boundaries of a moving cloud of mist… that's the perception I can recognize. My inner feeling is that the definitions offered by religions are implicitly included in my perception. I have the choice to try to communicate this insight to other people, or to remain silent…

Adina and I are having the same conversations simultaneously in our community. Half of our adults were raised Christian and still find

refuge, justification, and hope in the Christian faith because of the »special status of humankind« compared to all other forms of life.

When I share my spiritual experiences and insights in our group discussions, I clearly notice that we sometimes lack a common language. When it comes to questioning their beliefs, some people are very closed off, if not downright unfriendly. The only thing that helps is patience and trust that, over time, they too will gain further insights through their own experiences. It's important not to force any pronouncements, as this pressure would only lead to further resistance and slow down our shared development. Everyone has to arrive at their own insights, at their own pace. No matter how often and intensely people talk about a topic and consider a particular perspective »normal«, no one can help another person with self-discovery or even teach them anything. This doesn't happen quickly, because insight takes time—precisely the amount each individual needs.

Even within our community, harmony is still limited, especially among those who have had no direct contact with spiritual development as perceived by the latest insights. Many have not yet grasped that religions represent a necessary step, but one that must also be overcome. Some have never even consciously prayed as Christians, let alone meditated.

What seems important, however, is that in recent years many people's religious faith has been severely shaken, thus opening up space for individual development. Yes, there's still a long way to go, but hey, what else do I have to do?

October 5, 2041

Jitu now has a son! He proudly announced the birth of Ismael in Koti and also sent a photo. It was a home birth that went smoothly with the help of an experienced midwife.

Adina and I are both very happy. Of course, our first thought is how Noram is doing and when he and Rachida will come to visit us in Germany again. I suspect that Adina – like me – thinks about grand-

children from time to time, but we also know that this isn't our decision.

In this context, I give a lot of thought to the humans' proliferation on the planet. The principle of equality still poses difficulties for many people, especially when it comes to the size of the human population. Adina and I try to discuss the topic calmly and dialogically within the community and in forums and conferences. We don't always succeed. Sometimes, especially among people with a Christian upbringing, emotions run so high that a reasonable discussion becomes impossible. We then have to let the matter sink in and accept that such a comprehensive change in self-perception cannot be achieved in a single generation. It will take time and, above all, shared spiritual development to gain the necessary insights.

The topic is certainly very present all over the world and is discussed, debated, and sometimes even considered from a dialogical attitude, as David Bohm described it. Thanks to actively maintained internet forums, the realization is spreading in many communities across the planet that achieving and maintaining a shared equilibrium for all living beings, including humans, is absolutely essential. It is also becoming increasingly clear that this is only possible if humans also consider all other living beings as equal to themselves and adjust their behavior accordingly. Even more important is the realization that the number of individuals within a species must be adjusted according to the shared context of life. The logical conclusion that only as many humans should live on the planet as is beneficial for all other living beings on the planet is becoming ever more obvious.

This realization, however, is not immediately understandable to many. Some even fear that life and death could once again be decided by violence and power… and unfortunately, solely due to past human history… but the global consensus is that the decision of whether and how many children a family should bring into the world is and must remain an individual one. It can only be made when the

individuals involved have gained the necessary insight about the interdependence of all life.

It will be a long process, that much is very clear to Adina, me, and many others around the world who advocate for it. It is also clear that neither pressure nor violence should be used in this regard. Recognizing this necessity is part of every person's spiritual development, and this realization cannot be forced. It only arises in a space of trustfulness, where people do not feel threatened and can therefore relax. Viewed on a global scale, this is a tremendous process of collective development in which we all must participate.

October 22, 2043

Our wish for grandchildren has just been given a good chance of finally coming true. It was a very powerful moment when Rachida and Noram announced that they would likely be staying in Walzbachtal for the next two years.

When asked how this could have happened, Rachida replied with a mischievous smile and pointed to her belly. Adina was crying, and I pretended to hide my joy. Of course, I couldn't fool anyone. It must have something to do with our community. It seems that young people feel so safe here with us that they can even consider starting a family… What's even better for us is that Rachida also decided to have the baby here. They would have had plenty of time to return to Casablanca, but she insisted on not taking any risks in this matter.

This means that next spring, around April, another infant will likely be added to the population statistics in Walzbachtal.

Noram and I have partially resumed our travels together. One focus will be exchanging ideas about aspects and challenges of the community-building process.

The self-sufficiency of the Walzbachtal community is now relatively stable and secure for the number of people living here. Compared to other communities, we seem to be doing quite well. However, some complain about the limited variety in the menu, and especially the

older residents miss fruits and foodstuffs that used to be imported from the south. Every now and then a chicken is slaughtered, and a few surviving cows provide the necessary milk, which is processed into butter and cheese. All in all, it's spartan, but everything is fresh and healthy.

Noram is working in parallel with all the communities he visited on the development of the decentralized internet. Connections to local servers now exist almost worldwide, at least in those regions where the old cable infrastructure could be quickly restored to working order. He also mentions that there is a very intensive exchange within the now revitalized open-source community regarding whether and what role artificial intelligence could play in the further development of global communication. Many of the software developers involved argue that a deliberately cautious approach to AI models, such as »DeepSeek«, would significantly facilitate the implementation of many necessary tools.

The Working Group on World Population Development reports, based on new data collections that are becoming increasingly accurate thanks to the new decentralized internet, that the number of births is now only slightly less than the number of deaths. This trend has stabilized over the last twelve months, and if it continues, a gentle but steady decline in the world population is expected.

This information reignites the debate of recent years regarding the number of people who could positively contribute to the overall equilibrium of all life on this planet. The understanding that this number is highly dependent on the specific living context and may need to be considered very differently in different regions is increasingly spreading throughout all communities.

Reports from various regions of the world indicate that communities with approximately 150 to 200 members are considered viable in the long term. Such group sizes are better able to stabilize themselves and provide for themselves within their environment without disturbing or harming other living beings.

We still have plenty of room for growth here in Walzbachtal before we reach that number of people. On the other hand, there are quite a few »small« communities in the region, like ours, with fewer than fifty people. We keep considering whether and how several small communities could potentially be merged into a larger one, so that the freed-up space could then be returned to nature.

This thought really won't leave me alone, even though I've long been aware of the hurdles that would have to be overcome and that it would require complete consensus from all parties involved.

Ethan has become a constant companion on my journey through his notebooks, and I realize how important his insights are to me. But I also notice, even just briefly on my own, that a lot of thoughts are swirling around in my head, and that I'm now, better than before, able to step back from these many considerations. *›Have I surpassed myself now? Have I just developed further?‹*

What I experienced in the company of Ismael also seems to have brought about this state. Ethan wrote back then that every human being must independently recognize this interconnectedness, before they can choose to live in harmony with the shared equilibrium of all life thus recognized. These are statements from people of different times and from different worlds, yet they harmonize and complement each other. Statements that come not only from Ismael, but also as if my great-grandfather had spoken to me.

Ajola

I am deeply moved and at the same time full of trust in what awaits me. It's also becoming increasingly clear to me that I still have some things to sort out. It's time. I'm apprehensive about it, and it's not easy. Another sip of water and a deep breath. I take my communicator and type a message to Ajola. I want to talk to her. It's an hour earlier here than in Europe, so Ajola must be enjoying her lunch break somewhere. Her face appears on the screen. She looks relaxed.

"Mika, it's been a long time. I'm so glad to hear from you," she says calmly, almost casually, as if we had just said goodbye yesterday. "How are you?" she asks.

"Yes, you too, it's so nice to see you again. I'm sorry for my long silence. I've fi-

nally arrived at my family's after a long journey and I'm a bit overwhelmed by the welcome here. So I'm doing well, I'd say. I thought I'd get in touch. I've been thinking of you and wanted to know how you're doing."

"I've been thinking about you a lot lately. I've been wondering why you haven't been in touch. I've really missed talking to you... were you busy, or just not in the mood?"

"To be honest... both. There was often no connection to MultiNet, and sometimes I was too busy, or I just didn't feel like talking," I hear myself say.

"Okay, that sounds honest," Ajola smiles and shakes her head slightly.

We look at each other for a while without saying a word. The quiet does me good. I can clearly feel Ajola, and what I feel is comforting.

"What are you doing right now? Are you still working on projects on campus?" I ask, just to say something.

Ajola smiles mischievously again, knowing our old game. Whenever we can't stand the silence between us, we talk about trivial things, just to fill the moment.

“Yeah, not much has happened since you left. The work on the ScanBot is finished, the machine is running smoothly now, everything's sorted there. I'm currently being the »caretaker« around here, and I share the job with Reyad…” she replies.

“Oh, Reyad's still on campus? You two must be working well together, huh?” I can't resist teasing her.

“Sure, you joker,” she replies, quick-witted as usual. “And Reyad's been dating a handsome young man for a while now, head over heels in love, as he says, if that's what you mean…”

“Oh, right, I didn’t even know he was into boys…” I reply, surprised.

“Apparently, he didn’t know either,” Ajola giggles, amused.

“Are you disappointed that Reyad dumped you?” I joke half-heartedly and change the subject. “But, all joking aside, you wanted to think about what you want to do in the future, didn’t you? Being a house caretaker can certainly be challenging, but how long do you want to do the job?”

“Well, it was a job that needed doing, I didn’t have anything more important to do, and Boris Aalbach kindly asked…”

“…And you couldn’t say no,” I interrupt.

“You’re spot on!” she says with a smile. “But things aren’t quite as adventurous for us as they are for you out there in the wide world… what’s on your agenda?”

“Here in the wide world, there’s a multi-day family celebration, and they’re serving a crazy magic potion that makes the water taste sweet if you drink it afterward,” I begin, and I can’t help but laugh. “But for me, the most important thing here will probably be my initiation ceremony, which is being held in a few hours.”

"What, really? They're holding a ceremony for you? Just for you?" she asks, astonished.

"Of course! No, I don't know. I'm not entirely sure yet, but I think some cousins might also be having their rites of passage on this occasion. It would make sense age-wise, and my family here is very large... but my mentor didn't tell me all the details today," I explain.

"What do you mean by mentor and ritual? Could you be a bit more specific, Mika?" Ajola asks incredulously.

“As far as I can tell, I’m going through a ritual today that represents the transition from adolescent to adult,” I reply. “Each candidate is assigned an adult as a mentor. Mine is my uncle. Ismael, my mom’s brother…”

“Okay, okay…” Ajola still looks slightly irritated. “It seems pretty complicated. That’s why you look so stressed, right? Were you just asleep or something?” she teases, as usual.

“No, I just lay here in the cool air for a bit. I just had a very long and very interesting, but also very intense, preparatory meeting with my uncle. It both calmed me down and tired me out.”

“You’ll survive, won’t you? It’s the fate of heroes on their journeys to have to face all kinds of difficulties…” she laughs at me kindly and then adds, “So you’re still with your family, and when are you leaving for the project?”

“Project, hmm, project, ah yes, there was something else… The day after tomorrow we’re off to Gorom-Gorom,” I reply. “We’re even a small group traveling to the project together from here.”

“I see, okay. You obviously haven’t had a moment’s peace on your trip…” Ajola says firmly. “When you get back, you’ll have so much to tell me. You’re coming back, aren’t you?”

“I’ll definitely come back. It’s just not clear exactly when,” I reply, not leaving

Ajola’s question unanswered.

“I’d also like to hear how your trip around the world went!” I hear Reyad’s voice and see his face next to Ajola’s.

"Well, if you're waiting for me, Reyad, then I'll certainly come back," I wave to Reyad. "I'm looking forward to seeing you again," I say, and watch as Reyad disappears from view again.

Ajola's eyes continue to gaze calmly at me. I can't quite tell if what I'm receiving from her is sadness or longing. Perhaps both. And I feel both within myself. We remain silent for a few moments. Then I break the silence.

"I should gather myself a bit for the upcoming ceremony. I feel like some peace and quiet and centering could be helpful..."

"Good, Mika. I'm looking forward to talking again soon. I have the feeling that being away is doing you a lot of good, and things seem to be going well with your family too," she says gently and blows me a kiss.

"I'm also very glad that we chatted again. See you soon, whenever that may be..."

Ajola waves to me and disconnects. The conversation was helpful. *›Do I feel better now? Do I see more clearly what the future holds?‹* my last thoughts drift. Then tiredness takes over.

Ferouse and the Ceremony

The sun will set soon. The transition between day and night is much shorter here than at home. Right now it's still very bright, and a few minutes later it will already be evening and the lights will have to be switched on. I slept for almost two more hours. Ismael had predicted this. He said that during sleep, much of the information he passed on to me, especially that which wasn't conveyed through words but directly through the immediate energy connection, is only then internalized by the body. I will then probably know everything that is necessary, even if most of it isn't consciously recognized as understood.

I get up and put on the freshly washed trousers and shirt that Grandma prepared for me. The fabrics feel pleasant against my skin. They aren't my own clothes. I don't know where they come from. They look new, or at least not very worn. I can only imagine that my grandma prepared them a long time ago and probably just washed

them again yesterday.

The street lanterns are lit, and the brief twilight begins. The time for the ceremony has come. I have to go out. Ismael is waiting on the street in front of the house. I walk past Jitu and Kyara. They look at me with moist eyes. I can feel their excitement. I'm probably not the first child in our family to undergo the rite of passage, but I am their first grandchild. I didn't know that until just a moment ago. They both insisted on telling me when Grandma brought me the clothes. I am the link between the worlds, they said, because I was born and raised in Europe, but I will be performing the family's rite of passage in Koti. As a young person coming from outside and experiencing this, I am already an exception. And this particular situation is not an everyday occurrence for anyone in the community. The importance of this moment now weighs heavily on my shoulders. My knees, however, are steady, they don't waver, and I walk confidently out onto the street.

Jitu and Kyara follow me. Ismael greets me at the gate and, with a welcoming gesture of his right arm, leads me out onto the street toward the ceremonial square. There are only a few people on the street, not many. The most of them are obviously already in the square. Everyone smiles at me and follows us as soon as we pass. Ismael holds my right elbow with his left hand, keeping pace with my steps. I haven't taken anything else. No substances. No palm wine. I am awake and fully aware of everything. And yet, I feel like I'm in a dream.

Further ahead, I can already see the lights of the ceremonial square. At the next intersection, I see a young woman, accompanied by her mentor, also following this path. So I certainly won't be the only one tonight. But the only one of my kind, as my grandparents used to say. Following the young woman, I see Ferouse walking. On the main street, our groups converge and mingle. People talk quietly to one another, but they don't whisper. I also notice that I'm not receiving much attention. This is incredibly reassuring. I realize that I don't want to play a special role in tonight's ceremony, even though I will unintentionally do so anyway.

I look for Ferouse. I've lost her in the crowd and don't want to be too obvious about looking for her. But help comes unexpectedly from Ismael. He firmly nudges my elbow, and when I look at him, I see Ferouse walking beside him. Without stopping, Ismael moves to my left side, and I'm now walking next to her. Her hand briefly takes mine and squeezes it tightly. I don't let go. We look deeply into each other's eyes,

and I realize I'm losing myself in her gaze. I'm not looking where I'm going at all. I only see Ferouse's eyes. If Ismael weren't guiding me so confidently, I'd probably stumble.

Everything takes an eternity. The connection I feel with Ferouse is so intense that time seems to stand still. I see images in her eyes, recognize faces and worlds that are consciously unknown to me. It's as if, just like with Ismael, an enormous database is being downloaded into my brain with a single glance. Our hands are fused together, and her palms are hotter than I ever thought possible. Her shoulder touches mine as we walk, and her warmth mingles with mine, intoxicating my senses.

I have to blink, and when I open my eyes again, the encounter with Ferouse is over. Ismael is walking on my right again, and Ferouse is nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, the crowd on the street has multiplied, and I see that a young man and another young woman have joined us with their companions. The ceremony site is not far now. I can hear the drums setting the rhythm. The people disperse, while we, the initiates, stand and wait with our respective mentors in front of the entrance to the ceremonial square.

I feel like I'm facing a new, albeit long-awaited, beginning.

◊ ◊ ◊

Addendum

Glossary

MultiNet: The international knowledge network of communities connects diverse local knowledge databases and integrates them into a shared, global management system. This system enables parameterized term searches across all databases. The advantage is that the collective knowledge of humanity is accessible everywhere and to everyone. Knowledge is secured locally and regionally, so that in case of negative events such as IT disasters, power outages, or the destruction of storage media, only the local component would be affected. In this era, concepts like »intellectual property« have long been superseded. All people build upon the knowledge of all people. Anyone can set up a private MultiNet account, available exclusively for their personal use worldwide.

Communicator: An electronic device for transmitting information within the MultiNet and to other communicators. The main components of this modular system are a processing unit, memory modules, wireless network access, a speaker, a camera, a microphone, a gyroscope, and a capacitive touchscreen color display. All components are housed in a robust, weatherproof casing, allowing for easy replacement, even between existing devices. With proper use, a communicator has a lifespan of over fifty years. Communicators are repaired and, if necessary, technically upgraded or completely remanufactured by local FabBots.

InterMod: Intermodal transport systems serve the respective interregional transport of goods and people. Various motorized vehicles, such as electric trains, buses, and sometimes rail bikes, are combined with non-motorized vehicles (electric cargo bikes) to connect sections of the route according to a desired timetable. The sections to be combined are established primarily based on actual demand and follow the connecting routes between communities. People can join freight transports, but only if the respective vehicle has sufficient space for passengers. Vehicles that operate sections solely for passenger transport are the exception and are primarily reserved

for connecting communities to regional learning centers. All intermodal transport systems are provided only on demand and with a minimum occupancy rate of seventy percent. Booking and requesting use of an intermodal route is done via the MultiNet system using the communicator.

MultiMod: The multimodal transport system functions similarly to intermodal transport systems, except that it is used for long-distance routes whose segments can be spread across the globe. A planned MultiMod route is essentially a combination of all available InterMod segments along a desired journey and is therefore directly dependent on their availability. Booking and requesting a specific MultiMod route is done via the MultiNet using the communicator.

TransSocietyBoard: The TransSocietyBoard is the global community cooperation system used to organize project-related activities worldwide. It allows communities to publish their project proposals, define the support needed for each project, and plan all the resulting movement of people and materials. The TransSocietyBoard links InterMod and MultiMod with MultiNet, as well as other regional and local information and planning applications. The system is accessible to everyone by default, either on their personal communication device or at local public terminals within the communities, and can be individually configured to meet specific needs. Travel planning with the TransSocietyBoard prioritizes maintaining the mutual equilibrium of all forms of life. It focuses on the movement of necessary goods and coordinates the movement of people with the already planned transport of goods. For the movement of people, the principle of sensible utilization of means of transport absolutely applies, which unconditionally prioritizes a minimum occupancy of transport that is already needed over the »fast travel« of people.

Energy Conversion Principle: A technological breakthrough in 2078 enabled the controlled conversion of energy states. Based on this empirically discovered principle, chemical elements, and thus materials, can be converted into pure energy with virtually no loss. This energy can then be used to generate other chemical elements and materials. While the practical application of the energy conversion principle is now very well documented, its underlying principles have not yet been fully under-

stood or proven. The technical design required for practical application is relatively simple for the individual components and their arrangement, and the results themselves demonstrate the effectiveness of the application.

FabBot: A compact yet highly complex, fully automated production unit for manufacturing necessary materials, components, and devices. The FabBot recycles raw materials from existing materials, as well as electronic and mechanical components, and, based on globally standardized blueprints, uses the newly recovered materials to repair and rebuild required components and machine parts. Depending on its size, the FabBot can also produce complete, complex devices and machines. A FabBot unit can thus manufacture smaller FabBot units or the components needed to build larger ones. This also enables its own duplication and self-repair. In addition to physical and chemical principles, the FabBot also utilizes the energy conversion principle. To a limited extent, it can also assemble materials not readily available from the recovered raw materials. FabBot units are part of the equipment of every regional community organization, and their number is increased or decreased according to actual needs.

ClothBot: A sub-type of FabBot, specialized in the production and reuse of clothing. The ClothBot fully automates the production of new textiles by reusing old fabrics and utilizing 3D printers, knitting machines, and sewing machines. The ClothBot can restore any textile fed into the reuse process or analyze and regenerate it based on suitable information or material samples. The ClothBot maintains a collection of patterns for clothing and other objects created from textiles and sewing supplies. These patterns are entered by users via device's communication console, or are configured using a communicator and stored in the global ClothBot archive. The required measurements for producing desired clothing can be captured directly on-site by the ClothBot using its integrated 3D body scanner, or entered by the user via the console or communicator. In terms of size and energy consumption, the ClothBot is a relatively small type of FabBot and can therefore be present in virtually any community. The device is usually housed in shared buildings, so that the 3D scanner can be used in a suitable and private space.

PrintBot: A subtype of FabBot, specialized in the production of printed materials on paper and cardboard in various formats and designs. The PrintBot's functionality is based on the reuse and recycling of paper products, offering the ability to create books and other printed publications on demand and then recycle them after their initial use. The PrintBot is the smallest type of FabBot and is primarily found on campus learning centers, where the service is mainly used by students during their studies.

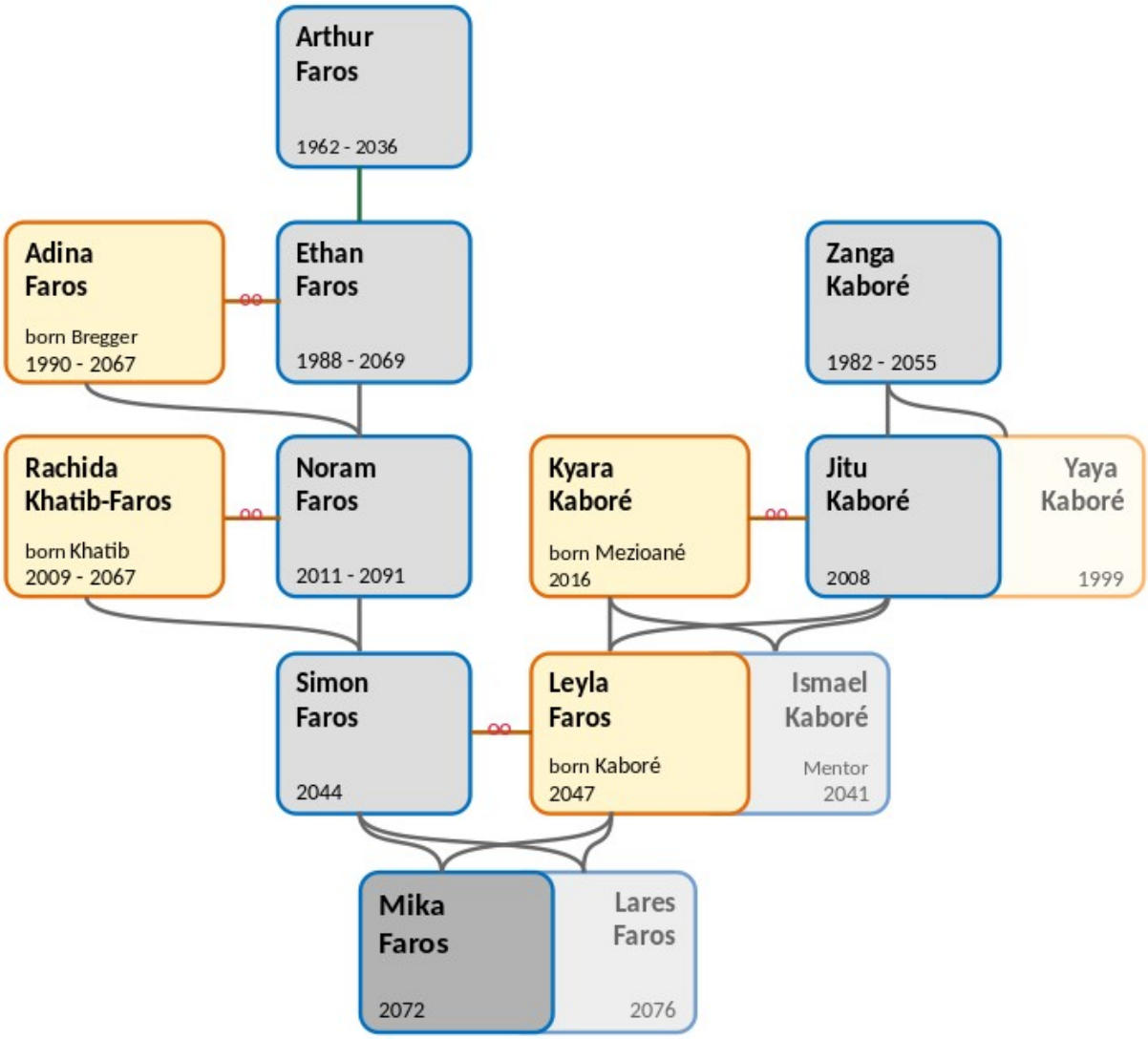
ScanBot: A service that automatically digitizes any labeled material to a high standard and stores it as a versatile information format in a specified MultiNet account. The ScanBot can automatically process labeled objects of any kind, from loose sheets to bound books, without compromising the physical or chemical integrity of the objects being scanned. If the objects are to be archived in their original form after scanning, a restoration step can be integrated into the processing workflow to prepare the original materials for archiving in a high-quality manner. When the objects are no longer needed in their physical form, they can be transferred to a PrintBot for further processing. For this reason, ScanBot units are usually placed near PrintBot units.

Flettner-Rotor: A rotating cylinder exposed to the wind flow. It acts like a sail, generating a force perpendicular to the wind direction. The Flettner rotor is used on hybrid-powered transport ships that also utilize rotor sails as a propulsion source. Flettner rotors not only provide auxiliary propulsion but also act as ship stabilizers with their rotational momentum. A rotor drive alone is fundamentally impossible, as it cannot guarantee propulsion or maneuverability in the absence of wind. For this reason, Flettner rotors are simultaneously used as vertical-axis wind turbines to charge batteries while harnessing wind power. The stored electricity then supplies power to the ship's electric motors even when there is no wind.

Pickthresher: A further development of an existing agricultural machine, which now corresponds to the primacy of the shared equilibrium of all life. These spider-like harvesting machines, including the pickthrescher, move on motorized stilts, leaving minimal soil compaction and preventing damage to plants during harvesting. Using these machines also reduces the number of people needed for harvesting. Following the

principles of permaculture, grain is no longer cut along with the stalk; only the ear is picked. The ears of grain simply regrow after harvesting. The picking process is followed by threshing. These threshed plant residues are used for soil improvement and for the construction and repair of mud-and-straw houses. Special sensors also enable the automated collection of ripe tree and shrub fruit.

Mika’s Family Tree



Thanks

A heartfelt thank you goes to the people with whom we were able to extensively discuss the content and potential impact of this story while we were still writing it. The conversations, feedback, and, not least, constructive criticism provided us with invaluable support, without which the book in its current form would not have been possible.

Back Cover Text

The survivors of a climatic and sociopolitical catastrophe of planetary proportions develop a new way of life in a possible future, one based on preserving the shared balance of all life. To live in harmony with the wholeness of their environment, humanity as a species chooses to consume only what is truly and actually needed. They call this advanced way of life and economy an »actual needs economy«.

In our story, this possible world is viewed through the eyes of a young person on the cusp of adulthood. A birthday present opens the door to a past and unknown world, leading to a deeply moving and, at times, shocking comparison with the way of life he is accustomed to.