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Die Verteidigung des Paradieses

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pp. 23 - 33

I. THE COMMUNITY

Long ago, at the age of four or five, when I went through the field of pines and climbed up those footholds carved into the face of the cliff leading to the entryway to the Rocky Sea, I was able to see beyond the borders of our resort and into Hell: the Great Plain. Using Jorden's telescope, you could clearly see the holes in the force fields over the former colonies. Malfunctions were causing crazy weather under the domes. Flames flickered in *Waldeinsamkeit II*, a never-ending hurricane raged in *Avalon A5*, and in *Schönau* it snowed like in an antique snow globe that someone wouldn't stop shaking. Sometimes I would picture the people inside. How they were frozen driving their cars, at work at the office, or sleeping in their beds, rigid and yet unharmed, Sleeping Beauty style, like they were only waiting to be able to finish what they were doing, as soon as everything got back to normal.

Between what was left of the domes, the hills of the gray steppe stretched out in the light of the blazing sun. Before the Downfall, the only good thing about them had been the huge fields of solar panels that produced energy. Enough energy for all the colonies, old cities, garden zones and whatever else, easy.

I wished I'd tried harder to remember how it all looked – the colonies, the steppes – those times I'd stood up there at the top of the cliff. One day, in year three after the Downfall, large banks of fog had suddenly formed on the Great Plain, growing thicker and thicker, until only the tips of the protective domes could be seen. Cornelius' only explanation was that the shields over the reservoir lakes must have failed too, and the temperature must have increased so much that even the groundwater was evaporating. Hell had been invisible since then.

But the most beautiful blue sky still spread over the high valley with the low pastures, the rose pasture and the meadows and forests of our resort. During the Downfall, our force field had switched from a programmed cycle of four seasons meant to give hikers the feeling of old

Germany, to a single season, eternal summer, with warm but never unbearably hot days, and nights when it rained but never stormed. For eleven years now, we had been living under what our world-best leader Cornelius had called perfect conditions, half in jest. He had repeatedly emphasized how important it was for us to stay together. The few other survivors he, Jorden, Chang, Özlem, and Anne had come across in their initial search for food and useful objects on the Great Plain were visibly ragged, and within a few months after the Downfall, lone fighters and gangs roamed the ruined cities. Even Jorden and Chang began to leave the resort less and less often because of it. All of us, except me of course, had seen and heard enough horror stories in the days before the Downfall to know what would happen next down there. And why should we want to leave? The cattle we raised, the vegetable gardens and the fields we had sown, the berries and mushrooms in the woods – they fed exactly six people. Two or three more, and before long, we would all be sleeping with a knife under our pillow, as Jorden put it once. It was a pretty big advantage for us that our resort had always been kept strictly separated as an organic zone. Others who know more about it than I do have put a lot of consideration and effort into keeping it that way. Because of the people living on the steppe, we camouflaged the three known entry points on the German side. We don't know what happens in Austrian territory. But I sure hope the Rocky Sea's crevasses, fields of rubble, and ridges protect us from possible intruders. Still, the fact that no one and nothing has come in during the eleven years we've lived here is a sign that everything has been destroyed further south, too, maybe even worse than in Germany. I don't even want to imagine how terrible it must be there. Our world-best leader likes to use one of the foxiest old words ever when he talks about the survivors outside our resort: dignity. Unlike all the others, we've kept our dignity.

But sometimes – especially when I see the sunburned, dirty face looking back at me from our only mirror in the outhouse and recoil, until I realize Shit, that's me! – I get scared. And I don't think it's any different for the others. The fear of waking up one day, having become one of those miserable people from the Great Plain. That's another reason we keep up the fight against forgetting. Without the omniscient voices of the PMs, the personal managers, from the transmitter plugs in our ears. The ones you could rely on before the Downfall because they knew the answer to almost every question. What's the name of this plant? Who ruled the Roman Empire in 117? And so on. Without them, we're slowly losing the names for the things around us. Sometimes I imagine how with each passing day on the Alp, another piece of what we knew

disappears from our heads, until the world, the mountains, animals, and plants, have less and less to tell us, and in the end we're left searching deeper and deeper in the fog of our memory for a name that has vanished without a trace, and can only stammer: "snap thing" for wood, "hard thing" for stone, and later "ah" for sun, "yum" for food, "moo" for milk. Just recently, Cornelius tried to sing an old song while clearing away the dishes after supper: "Scarborough Fair". He hesitated at "parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme." And then when he started to sing "Silent Night," he repeated "all is calm, all is bright", and kept repeating it with increasing agitation, unable to remember the end of the verse. Cornelius himself admits that he can no longer list the German Chancellors in order, nor the dates of the Thirty Year's War, the year the German Kaiserreich was established, or the years the world-best poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was born and died.

Old Anne, our community's granny, is the only one who still knows the oddest names for the rarest herbs and animals, although a terrible transition has taken place over the past few years: she's forgetting the simplest things more and more often. She says it's not the worst thing in the world, although she's 110% alone in her opinion. "Amnesia," she once explained, "can be a blessing too, believe me." And with that, the topic was closed. Most of all, she liked to be alone and working on her straw *talismans*, which is why Chang calls her "quirky." Like Jorden, she occasionally stays away over night because she needs "a change of air," as she puts it. As far as we know, she walks around the resort and sleeps in shacks she built herself.- Cornelius has often scolded her about it, since something could easily happen to her out there. He told me that she used to be completely different. He used lots of old-fashioned sayings and words to describe her: someone who *didn't beat around the bush*, an *honest soul*; she had a *rough charm*. He'd always valued her advice. Yes, he said, he still did. He said she'd been *active* with NOROFORK, the No Robots for Kids movement, and had *vehemently* promoted the view that, no matter how perfectly robot tutors might be programmed for individual children, they couldn't replace flesh and blood teachers. The events she organized with her husband Bernd, Cornelius' best friend, had *been legendary*. *Costume parties!* But then, almost exactly a year before the Downfall, both Bernd and their son had been killed in a climbing accident. They say Anne was like a different person. Everything she used to love was suddenly meaningless to her. She'd even spent months at a silent retreat in a monastery, and she used to *debate* so passionately! It was *tragic*, Cornelius

said, that just when Anne was finally feeling strong enough to start again, that was when disaster struck.

In their first years at the resort, Anne and Özlem spent a great deal of time together. The two of them shared a special interest in plants and animals. But that's over now. Anne has slowly become erratic. There are moments when she is talkative and, I'm not lying, the super-best person in the world, cheering us up with her sharp, trenchant, and funny comments, from which not even Cornelius is safe. But her mood can change abruptly. She'll suddenly stutter that she's forgotten what she really wanted to say, and then mutter angrily that no one really understands. A couple months ago, after Anne had a particularly strong mood swing followed by endless confused mumbling, Özlem said she was afraid our Anne had a brain tumor or was suffering from Alzheimer's. But what could we do? I immediately added *Alzheimer's* and *tumor* to my list of old-fashioned words, just like that amnesia thing.

Since then I've sought out Anne's company even more. And maybe it helps her, and her memory, when I'm with her. When she lets me, I accompany her along the stream and down the meadows, where you can hear the rushing of the river, and where her realm lies: her herb and vegetable garden, which she cultivates for herself alone. And what a garden it is! As a little boy I couldn't get enough of the sight of the beds, which Anne had named after the continents and decorated with emblems of straw. Tiny pyramids rise between the flowers and bushes, castles stand proudly upon stones, rocks represent the world's highest mountains, the Himalayas, and a trickle, the Amazon, meanders through the undergrowth. In the midst of all that, Anne stood with her wide-brimmed hat, the ruler of her straw planet. A ruler who, when I asked her, had a story ready for every building, her eyes sparkling in her leather brown wrinkled face. But that's all in the past. Now, more and more often, her gaze is dull.

One of the measures Cornelius had suggested for combatting communal forgetfulness is that we name our cows after the most important inventors, artists, athletes, and politicians in human history. I think it's a pretty good idea. That way, we're reminded of them daily. Our pastures are grazed by Nero, Titian, Einstein, Hitler, Kafka, Kennedy, Beckenbauer, Bijoy, and Hu. And in front of the different rosebushes that Cornelius tenderly cultivates outside the cabin, the names of the different varieties hang in transparent sleeves. They were once used in a hospital on the Great Plain for storing human blood, or at least that's what Chang says. Our fight against forgetting never ends. Maybe that's why, sitting here, on this shining, bright morning of the first of

February in year eleven after the Downfall, bending over my nice new black notebook at the dining table in the cabin, I'm so unsettled by question of what it could mean that everyone except Cornelius forgot that I turn fifteen this day, and not just that. Could it be that they've forgotten me? Could it be that, because of puberty, even tougher, more unpleasant times are approaching, times when I'll be even less important for the community than before? What do the others care whether I call myself the guardian of their story, or simply remain who I always was to them: Crum-bum Heinz?

I briefly laid aside my work and looked through the window into the sky over the high valley, cut by chirping swallows. I'm being totally honest: I prayed, and not to the best-ever LORD, but to my father, in secret, because the LORD can't stand competition. I have hardly any memory of the time before the Downfall, which could be because I was only four years old when I joined the others. Maybe it's also because of that sickness that Anne says is called *trauma*. But that's just a guess, because although Anne has medical knowledge like no one else in the community, she never tires of saying how the years she worked as a nurse lie so far in the past that they're no longer real. I have to admit, I'd really love to have a trauma. Didn't Anne also say that before the Downfall almost any illness could be healed?

Maybe it's just wishful thinking, but I still think I have a vague idea of who my father was. The word "space explorer" is really so rare and strange that there must be some reason why, of all things, it comes to mind when I think of my father, whom I would call "Papi". I also remember a room on the top floor of our house that we were "strictly forbidden" to enter. I would still sneak in all the time – to stand in awe in front of a huge screen animating the cross-section of a space station, in front of countless small, white models of space ships that dangled from the ceiling, and in front of a telescope in the skylight that pointed straight into sky, and which I approached with heart racing, actually believing I could see through it the dark dot of an orbiter, before I heard the electronic melody of the front door from the ground floor and quietly left my father's study. And then there's that feeling the word "weekend" creates inside me. The weekends – the beginnings of which Cornelius continues to announce because he thinks it's important that we don't lose the old order of days – the weekends were often not okay, and when I say not okay, I mean not okay. Often, someone was missing. Papi. He was really always missing, but we noticed it more on the weekends because on Monday all the other children would talk about what they had done with their parents. When my little brother and I would ask my mother about Papi, she

would only answer tersely, “He’s far, far away.” We couldn’t even talk to him with the transmitter. An almost unbearable tension lay over those weekends, which in my memory were also deathly silent. The slightest noise would cause me to hold my breath. Mother often switched on the TV wall, which she seldom did when Papi was there, where there was a lot of talk about NOAH, the Mars colony, where astronauts in shining white suits floated and waved, their voices and the movements of their mouths unsynchronized, that’s how far away they were, where rockets lifted off with a roar, vertically, climbing into the deep blue sky with unbearable slowness. Mother watched these liftoffs with such concentration that she seemed to forget everything around her. For some reason, I was sure at the time that whenever he wasn’t home, Papi was flying into space, on an important and super-secret mission related to the Mars colony. Then I would stare through the telescope in the strictly forbidden study because I thought if you looked through it, it would show you even the most distant things, as long as you wished for it hard enough, like in one of the fairy tales the F-87 told my brother and me at bedtime. But only black spots appeared in the lens.

In my imagination, when the disaster happened, which was on a Saturday, my father was on a station orbiting the earth. That would mean he survived, unlike my mother and my little brother, about whom I have to assume the worst. He saw the terrible images on the screen in the spaceship, the on-board computer offered its condolences in light of the near complete destruction of his species, and simultaneously congratulated him, because his son was among the few survivors. Since then, Papi has been carefully watching what has been going on down on the blue planet, alias Earth. He’s working feverishly to contact the few inhabitants of the Mars colony in order to return to his home planet with them one day. In fact, honest truth, during the daytime for a few days each month, you can see a tiny, glistening green dot behind the force field. No one can explain to me what it is. It could, or let’s say, it *must* be my father’s space ship. And the day may come when he’ll come and get me. Once when I told Özlem about it, I was surprised to see tears in her eyes. “That’s beautiful.” And after looking at me for a time, she said, “That’s probably right. That must be it.” She stroked my head, seldom so loving, so that even as it happened I knew I would always long for it.

“Keep on believing, ok? Promise me that,” she said. And I went nodnodnod. But over the years, the image of my father orbiting out there in his snow-white capsule has seemed less and less believable. I have to admit, recently I’ve even been ashamed of having lied, not just to the

community, but to myself most of all, in the end. And on this summer's day in February, the low pleas I spoke toward the sky, "Help me," "Come back," sounded absolutely infantile and not befitting a young man who had just turned fifteen.

It is in this moment that I feel the gentle, but firm and so familiar touch of small, soft paws on my pants leg. F-87, my old robot fennec and only best friend, had noticed my mood immediately and come out from under the table, where it had lain curled up in a ball.

"Oh, F-87. It's really bad," I say. "You heard all of that, right? If Cornelius hadn't thought of the notebooks... no one cares about me at all..." My electric desert fox folds its right ear empathetically and looks at me with its big eyes. Chang calls them manga-lookies. As it did with me, its master, the Downfall must also have traumatized my toy, so that everything it might tell me about my origin and parents has remained unsaid so far. All that F-87 has to say are the one hundred and one fairy tales on its entertainment drive, which it recounts in a gentle voice and always in the same words. You can't coax anything else out of it.

"Enough. It's time we got rid of that," Jorden had complained in super-terrible moment when I had enraged him again with some clumsiness. He said it was finally time to put the only valuable parts of "the thing," battery and motor, "to good use." And then "the thing" would be flung in a high arc back where it belonged, the junk heap. I should have stood right in front of him and protested, and Cornelius had repeatedly encouraged me to do it. But at times like that I'm truly afraid of Jorden, and remember what Chang told me in confidence a couple years ago: Jorden has killed someone before. He said Jorden had been a soldier with the EUROPEACE squad. In Kenya, he and his unit were also involved in an operation against terrorists who had barricaded themselves inside a building. Room by room, the soldiers had fought their way forward. In a small room in the basement, they had come across the bodies of a dozen kidnapped children who had been missing for some time. They had clearly starved to death. Because it was believed that the leader possessed important information, they had been ordered to capture him alive at all costs. Jorden and another soldier had been the ones to put him in the farthest corner of the building. Later, Jorden's comrade claimed in court that he hadn't been able to see exactly what happened, that everything had happened so quickly. At any rate, Jorden had shot the terrorist leader at close range, though he had been unarmed. The case was never solved. Even when Jorden told Chang the story, already high on schtix, he claimed he could no longer remember if

he'd really thought the leader was reaching for a gun, or if he'd just been too upset by the sight of the dead children. Although he was never convicted, he was discharged shortly thereafter and went to work as a ranger on the Alp. That's all anyone needs to know. Just try getting in Jorden's way! The man who, when he's in a good mood for a change, jokingly calls me "greenhorn".

Anyway. F-87 disappeared for two days after Jorden's threat. Every evening I would stand out in the pasture, hands cupped around my mouth, and call out that I would never let anyone hurt it, never! Only the baboons answered, howling, jeering. Finally, my electric fennec crept out of the forest and sat at my feet, blinking at me with a hesitant expression, just as if it didn't believe that I, Heinz, master and crum-bum in one, could protect it when worse came to worse. Its sandy brown TARBO fuzzy fur had suffered badly in the night rains. And I always wished for just that kind of fur. I'd have wanted it to cover my whole body, my arms and legs, much too long since the growth spurts. It's even lice-resistant, which means that F-87, unlike our community, isn't tortured every few months by the plague that always forces us to boil our bedding and clothes. With a plaintive expression, Özlem occasionally recalls the spotless ceramic toilets and showers they used to have in the cities of the Great Plain. Cleanliness is one of our greatest duties. It has to do with dignity thing. If you want to stay human, you've got to stay clean. So my robot fennec really deserves a place of honor in the community, I often think to myself.

When I was still a boy, I would often feel along my neck in the hope of finding that tiny indentation that F-87 has under its fur, underneath which, if you stick your finger in, you'll find the ON-OFF switch. I know it's only the empathy chip in my toy's head that makes it so loyal and caring. Still, I love my best friend. And when I say love, I mean love. I feel it on the inside.