

**DELETE**



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MANILLA



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*For Anke*

*Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison,  
he tries to get out and go home? Or if he cannot do so,  
he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers  
and prison-walls?*

*J.R.R. Tolkien*



## Prologue

You can sense their gaze. You can't see them, but you know they're there. It's as if their breath is tickling your ear. People are lying on the grass, reading, loving, bored. Children are squealing, dogs fighting. Your nose itches with the pollen. It's much too bright. The old woman on the park bench is feeding the pigeons, not realising that there's nothing there. You want to scream, but it's pointless. They've heard your pleas, but they won't listen. Their experiment wouldn't work if everybody knew the truth.

Your hand fumbles at the tubing in your throat, the filaments at the base of your skull. But of course you feel nothing besides the scabs where you scratched your skin bloody last night.

Take a deep breath.

A ball rolls towards you, emblazoned with the faded logo of the last World Cup. A small boy is running after it. You pick up the ball, feeling its weight. Your fingers explore the splits along its surface. Bringing it to your face, you smell leather, grass and the bitter aroma of dog shit.

This is not a ball.

The boy is standing a few paces away from you. He's eight at the most. He looks frightened – probably he's seen the haunted look in your eyes. Forcing a smile, you toss him the ball. He picks it up and runs away as if you were a flesh-eating monster.

The truth isolates you. The truth hurts. But ignorance is far worse. Still, what if the dreamers are right after all? What if you've been chasing after a fixation your whole life, like a paranoid madman?

These are their doubts, not yours: ones they've planted in your mind. They don't want you to see the truth.

Sometimes you wish the doubts were so strong that you could forget what you know. That you could believe in pigeons and footballs. That you could simply walk through the park, feeling the sun on your brow and smelling the summer. Living.

But forgetting is impossible. The truth cannot be repressed. You just feel it, their gaze upon you. Interested, sympathetic or full of a perverse desire to see you suffer – what does it matter which? Anger spawns inside you, an unfocused rage. A sound escapes you. People turn to look. You keep your eyes fixed on the gravel path.

They'll never set you free. You're part of the experiment, and your suffering is calculated. Your spirit mutinies – but how can you hope to oppose their omnipotent will?



## Chapter One

Chief Inspector Adam Eisenberg adjusted the lens of his binoculars. The articulated corny had stopped about two hundred yards away, on a remote patch of open ground to the south of Hamburg harbour, exactly where they'd expected. Two men got out. One of them opened the container, while the second stepped back a few paces, his pistol in his hand.

'Controllers, you ready?' Eisenberg said into his headset. He spoke softly, although the men were too far away to hear him. They were upwind anyway.

'Controller 1, ready.'

'Controller 2, ready.'

'Controller 3, ready. Suspicious vehicles approaching from the west. ETA approximately seven minutes.'

'Understood. move in on my command,' replied Eisenberg, his eyes glued to the view through the binoculars. The inside of the container was dark, its contents impossible to make out.

For one long moment, nothing happened.

Although the tenseness in the men's demeanour indicated the opposite, Eisenberg was worried the container was empty. Then the first pale face emerged into the light. It belonged to a girl with dark hair and olive skin, fifteen or sixteen years old. She wore a dirty T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms, torn in places.

One arm was held protectively in front of her eyes, as if she was blinded by the light.

Eisenberg's throat tightened. He could hear his pulse roaring in his ears. His hand slid involuntarily towards his service weapon, which was secured in his shoulder holster. He was hardly likely to need it – the arsenal brought by the two special operations units surrounding the area would be enough to bring a mid-sized gangland battle to a decisive end. The two bastards out there were drawing what was hopefully their last breaths as free men for a long, long time. For their victims, on the other hand, a period of unimaginable horror was coming to an end.

Just a few minutes more. They had to wait until the girls got into the approaching vehicles, whose owners Eisenberg's team had traced back to the masterminds of this ugly business. Only then would they have enough evidence to convict the men behind the trafficking ring.

It had taken months to put this case together. A CI had tipped them off about the time and location of the handover. Eisenberg's people hadn't had much time to prepare the area, but they'd managed it all the same. He and several special operations officers were now lying in wait behind an advertising billboard with a few inconspicuous spyholes.

'Suspicious vehicles approaching at reduced speed. ETA approximately four minutes,' Controller 3 warned them. Thanks to the new bug-proof communications system, such terms were no longer really needed these days, but habit had once again triumphed over necessity.

One after another, the frightened girls climbed out of the container. Some could hardly stay on their feet. Most likely they had had virtually nothing to eat and drink for days. There were more

than a dozen of them, none older than sixteen. They had been brought from Central America, where they had been abducted by professional traffickers and transported to Europe like cattle, in badly ventilated shipping containers. Eisenberg could only dimly imagine what an odyssey they had behind them.

But what would have been in store for them was potentially even worse. Here in Germany they would either have ended up in a dosshouse or, worse yet, being bought as personal slaves by wealthy men. Eisenberg hadn't thought it possible that such things could happen in Germany until the vice squad had brought the trafficking ring to his attention.

The last girl left the container. She was the smallest of the lot, probably no more than fourteen or fifteen years old. Even at this distance, Eisenberg could see her eyes, which were wide with fear.

One of the two guards shouted something, and the girls lined up. Only the little one seemed to hesitate. She tried to climb back into the container, as if hoping it would magically transport her home. The guard grabbed her arm and dragged her out as she struggled. Eisenberg could hear her desperate screams with total clarity, despite the distance. He swallowed. Just another few minutes, he pleaded in his mind. Just keep calm for another few minutes and it'll all be over!

At last the girl seemed to give in. But just as Eisenberg was breathing a sigh of relief, she suddenly bit her tormenter's hand. He yelled and let go of her. All hell broke loose. The girl struggled free of the group and ran for it, heading in Eisenberg's direction. The guard made to go after her, but the other girls – now milling frantically around, either out of panic or because they were trying to help the fleeing child – were in his way. She

was gaining ground, and the guards were bellowing. Then one of them lifted his pistol and aimed it at her back.

Eisenberg didn't stop to consider. 'Attack!' he yelled, leaping out from behind the billboard. Unlike the other officers, he wasn't wearing a protective vest – his role was to remain in the background and coordinate the operation. But he banked on the element of surprise and the fact that the criminals would be overwhelmed by their superior manpower.

The special operations officers sprang from their hiding places behind containers and bushes, barking orders. The shocked guards dropped their weapons and raised their hands.

The girl stood still. Astonished, she stared back and forth between the policemen storming towards her and her captors. Then she sank to her knees and hid her face in her hands.

'Stop the vehicles and arrest the occupants on suspicion of human trafficking,' ordered Eisenberg. He bent down over the sobbing girl, who was holding her hands over her head and leaning her upper body forward, as if trying to shield herself from blows.

'Es bien!' Eisenberg said in his broken Spanish. 'Soy policía. Todo es bien!'

Cautiously, she lifted her head. Her large, dark eyes held both hope and bewilderment. 'Policía?'

Eisenberg nodded, holding out his badge. She probably couldn't read it, but the official-looking object with the crest of the Hamburg Police seemed to reassure her. She looked around her, then came out with a stream of words that Eisenberg couldn't understand.

'Cómo te llamas?' he asked, when she paused for breath.

'Maria,' she said. 'Maria Costado Lopez.'

Eisenberg stretched out a hand to help her up. 'Adam Eisenberg.'

She smiled shyly, then threw her arms around him and held tight. Exactly as Emilia had done all those years ago, the last time he had ever hugged her.

Gingerly he extricated himself from her embrace and led her over to one of the police vans that were now ready to transport the girls, the special operations units and the men they'd arrested back to town.

The unit chief came towards him, his face serious.

'Another two or three minutes and we'd have nailed them.'

Eisenberg nodded.

'I know. Thanks, Ralf. That was very professional.'

'Good luck trying to explain it to the boss.'

Eisenberg sighed. He knew the operation was blown. The drivers who were supposed to pick up the girls would simply lie and say they had nothing to do with it. The evidence they had was far too thin for their mere presence in the vicinity of the handover site to be considered proof of guilt. Months of investigation had gone down the drain. They had rescued the girls, but how many others would be abducted because they had failed to arrest the ringleaders?

Eisenberg knew he had done the right thing. He could never have stood by and not acted while he watched the girl get hurt or even killed, and in any case he was duty-bound to prevent any harm coming to potential victims. Yet he also knew that the circumstances of the operation could all too easily be interpreted otherwise. Nobody could know what might have happened if he hadn't ordered the attack. Perhaps the guard would have missed, or wouldn't have shot at all.

As was so often the case, it would have been safer to do nothing, to just sit tight and keep to the plan they'd agreed in advance. At most he would have been in for a mild reproof, if the girl had actually been wounded.

But Eisenberg had acted, scuppering the plan, and he would have to take the consequences. He'd be all right – it wasn't the first time he'd picked a fight with the boss.

## Chapter Two

*Tristanleaf: Ready, group?*

*Mishmachine: Ready*

*ShirKhan: OK*

*Gothicflower: Ready*

*Dernik92: Let's go*

*Leobrine: Rdy*

*Tristanleaf: All right then. No AFK until the battle is over. For the White Tree! ATTACK!*

Mina Hinrichsen, alias Gothicflower, sent her half-orc warrioress leaping out from behind the bushes she had hidden among as she crept up on the enemy. She and the others stormed towards the members of the hostile Fire Guild. There were nine on the opposing side, clearly outnumbering Mina's team, but they had just been battling an emerald dragon and were in a weakened state. It was the ideal opportunity for a raid!

Mina's group had been following the Fire Guild for hours. An elf by the name of Tristanleaf, who could make himself invisible, had stayed hard on their heels and kept the others in the loop about where they could find the enemy brigade. The path to the Misty Mountains wasn't without its dangers, but the Fire Group had a Level 42 mage with them who could drive off anything smaller than an ice giant with the click of a mouse. Without knowing it, they had cleared a path for Mina's group.



The Fire Guild realised they were under attack. ‘Fuck off!’ wrote the enemy leader, a Level 28 berserker called Killbilly. ‘No ganking, you gimps!’ raged an opposing half-elf, angry that Mina’s group had slyly taken advantage of their weakness. In the world of role-playing games, this was considered uncool. Still, the Fire Guild had done similar things to members of the White Tree, Mina’s guild, several times before, so they couldn’t really complain.

Xeredor, the enemy mage, made a few suspicious movements with his arms. Mina could see magical energy beginning to coalesce around him, eddying at ever-increasing speed. Obviously he hadn’t used up all his manna.

Not good.

Mina’s half-orc stormed forward, trying to reach the mage before he could rain down a firestorm and kill half their group. But ShirKhan, the thief, was quicker, striking the enemy mage with an arrow before he could finish his spell.

Now the battle began in earnest. Their opponents were weakened, but they put up a fierce fight. Although Mina managed to bring down Killbilly, they were still outnumbered and better equipped. The battle was on a knife edge.

*ShirKhan: Oh my God, it’s true!*

Mina threw a rapid glance at the text window. What was going on? Didn’t ShirKhan have anything better to do than start chatting in the middle of a fight?

She tried to find the thief among the fray, while at the same time fending off the attacks of an enemy monk, eventually discovering him at the edge of the clearing where the battle was raging. Instead of taking part in the confrontation or at least trying to sneak up on one of their opponents, thief-style, he seemed to be wandering around aimlessly.







*ShirKhan: It's all true!*

Mina dispatched the monk with a stroke of her two-handed axe. Then she tried to make the thief see reason.

*Gothicflower: What's going on, ShirKhan? Help us, for fuck's sake, or we're screwed!*

*ShirKhan: World on a wire! It's all true!*

*Tristanleaf: Stupid Germans! Stop talking and fight!*

Mina could do nothing but follow the instructions of the Englishman, who was leading the raid – a powerful arch-demon was bearing down on her, having been bewitched by the mage.

*Tristanleaf: RETREAT!*

Their leader was right: the battle was over. And all because at the decisive moment that idiot Thomas – who played as ShirKhan – had lost his nerve. But retreating was easier said than done: the demon wasn't about to stop fighting just because Mina didn't feel like it anymore. Since it moved significantly more quickly than she could, she had no chance of escaping without killing it first.

*Gothicflower: Can't! Need help!*

But the others sought refuge in flight instead of wasting their energy on a hopeless rescue mission. Mina didn't hold it against them. She'd probably have done the same thing herself. But she was highly pissed off when her half-orc was encircled by the enemy and quickly beaten to a pulp. All that expensive equipment she'd spent so many hours earning in *World of Wizardry* was gone. Most likely the Fire Guild would be so annoyed about the attack that they'd take revenge by corpse camping, waiting by Gothicflower's body until Mina tried to bring the character back to life, then killing her all over again.

And all because of Thomas, who'd backed out of the fight like a coward instead of helping his group. She was the one who





had brought him into the guild in the first place, and she was the one who'd let him take part in the raid. He was going to pay for this!

She couldn't contact him via the group chat window, not now that her half-orc was pushing up daisies. So she tried Skype. Although his status indicated he was online, he didn't respond. That wasn't like him – usually he changed his status even when he went to the loo. What was up with him? Why had he been behaving so strangely during the raid? And what did he mean by all that stuff he was typing into the chat window? What the hell was 'true'? And what was that rubbish about the 'world on a wire'?

Thomas was clearly AFK – away from keyboard – but she could still call his mobile.

Dialling his number, she heard it ring, but nobody picked up. After a few moments it went through to his voicemail.

'Hi Thomas, this is Mina. What's up with you? You do realise you now have Gothicflower on your conscience? All my equipment is gone. Call me back as soon as you get this!'

She hung up and made some tea, trying to settle herself, but she couldn't get the rage in her chest under control. She kept thinking about the countless hours she had spent on *World of Wizardry*, developing her character. How many adventures had she had, how many dangerous situations had she survived to get her half-orc to Level 35? The character wasn't permanently gone, of course, but the double axe alone had cost nearly 200,000 gold florins – the fruit of dozens of hours spent playing the game, carrying out well-paid missions or plundering monsters' treasure.

Worse still, the Fire Guild would never let them forget about the botched raid. Attacking another group in a moment of





weakness wasn't exactly good for the image, but bungling it was something else altogether. Their reputation in and outside of the Guild of the White Tree was ruined.

She took a deep breath. It's just a game, she tried to tell herself. You're taking it much too seriously. It's not reality. But then why was she getting as worked up as if someone had stolen her purse? Was it understandable frustration at having her fun spoiled, or was this a genuine addiction to the game? Until now neither her computer studies nor her part-time job at a software firm had seriously suffered because of her interest in *World of Wizardry*, but hadn't she been in touch with other people less and less frequently of late – other flesh-and-blood people, not just online friends within the game? When was the last time she went to a party? It appalled her how long she had to think about it.

With an uneasy feeling in her stomach, she emptied the cup of tea and tried one more time to reach Thomas over Skype.



## Chapter Three

Superintendent Joachim Greifswald leaned back in his desk chair, his arms folded across his chest.

‘I’m not accusing you of anything, Eisenberg,’ he said in a conciliatory tone. ‘In situations like that lots of people let their nerves get the better of them.’

Eisenberg stared at his superior officer, a man ten years his junior who had been in charge of the Department of Organised Crime in the Hamburg State Office of Investigation for six months. His previous boss would probably have yelled at Eisenberg, accusing him of bungling the operation. He could have coped with that. But the patronising mildness in Greifswald’s voice was insufferable. He acted as if the entire Hamburg police – and the members of his own department in particular – were total idiots. Clearly he considered himself made of stronger stuff, having spent some time working with the police in New York as part of an international partnership – the toughest cops in the world, as he never tired of emphasising.

Eisenberg did his best to reply in a neutral, matter-of-fact tone.

‘I didn’t let nerves get the better of me. I gave the order to attack to save the girl’s life.’

‘According to your report, it doesn’t seem like the girl was under immediate threat,’ said Greifswald in his idiotic, pseudo-American accent, as if four years in the US were enough to make him forget how to speak proper German. They said he liked the people in his inner circle to call him ‘Joe’.

‘One of the two perpetrators was aiming a gun at her.’

‘Did he fire?’

‘No. That’s exactly what I was trying to avoid by giving the order to attack.’

‘And you’re certain he would have pulled the trigger.’

‘In light of the fleeing girl and the general situation I think that’s highly likely.’

‘What would you have done, if you were in the perpetrator’s shoes?’

‘I don’t understand the question.’

‘What’s so hard to understand? I’d like to know how you would have acted, had you been one of the guards. One of your girls is fleeing. Would you have shot at her and risked damaging the goods?’

Eisenberg didn’t answer.

Greifswald sighed theatrically. ‘How many times have I told you: “Think like the enemy.” If you’d followed my advice you would have realised that the perpetrator would never have shot at the girl. How old was she? Fourteen? What chance would she have had to outrun an athletic guy like that, in her state? She was half starved. He had a weapon in his hand, so it was completely natural to point it in her direction. He probably shouted at her to stop, and maybe he’d have fired a warning shot into the air or in her general vicinity. But he really had no reason to

injure her, and certainly not to kill her. The girl's life was never seriously in danger.'

Eisenberg was silent. He knew arguing would be useless. Greifswald hadn't been there. He hadn't seen the rage distorting the man's face. And yet he still believed he could judge the situation after the fact – nothing Eisenberg said could change that.

Greifswald leant forward.

'Taking matters into your own hands like that cost us months of painstaking work,' he said, his voice no longer conciliatory but cutting. 'By preventing us from catching the ringleaders and putting a stop to trafficking in Hamburg you've abandoned countless young girls to a terrible fate. Luckily you're the one who has to live with that, not me.'

Eisenberg didn't reply.

'In disciplinary terms I've got nothing on you,' Greifswald continued. 'You were heading up the operation, and it was your decision. But I can tell you I'm very disappointed. Let me be frank: you'll never lead another field mission as long as I'm in charge. You'd better make up your mind whether you want a desk job here or to try your luck in another department – but don't think that if you stay here you'll get an easy ride. I expect each and every employee to give their all, within the scope of their abilities.'

Eisenberg got up from his chair.

'Is that all, Superintendent?'

'Not quite. I'd like you to put together a detailed report on the people behind this thing. Financial investments, business contacts, residences, phone numbers, whatever you can find out. Call our colleagues in Honduras and Guatemala. Do some digging online. You know your way around the internet, right?'

And Eisenberg, I know you can't stand me, but it really doesn't bother me one way or the other. The cops in New York couldn't stand me either. I coped with them, and they're the toughest officers in the world. So don't think you can intimidate me with your accusatory looks and pointed silences. And maybe consider whether you really want to spend the rest of your days until retirement in Department Six.'

'Is that all, Superintendent?' Eisenberg said again.

'That is all, Eisenberg. I expect your report on my desk next Thursday. An electronic version will be fine – we waste far too much paper in this office already.'

Udo Pape, with whom Eisenberg shared a small office, looked up from his computer.

'How did it go? Not great, I assume?'

Eisenberg sat down as Pape waited patiently for an answer. He knew his colleague well.

'He suggested I should apply for a transfer.'

'I don't believe it! That arrogant . . .' Pape swallowed the term he was about to use. The office walls weren't thick enough for angry outbursts. 'You're not seriously considering it, are you?'

'The thought of being stuck in this office for the rest of my career doesn't exactly fill me with glee.'

'What do you mean?'

'He made it very clear that I wouldn't be leading any more field operations.'

'You? He can't be serious. You're the best head of operations he's got.'

'He disagrees.'

‘Well, I’ll tell you one thing for sure: if you go, then I’m not staying either. Let him find out what it’s like fighting organised crime all on his own.’

Eisenberg didn’t reply. Pape’s declaration of solidarity was all very well, but he knew that ultimately it wasn’t worth much. When push came to shove, nobody was going to sacrifice their chances of promotion just to protest an injustice. Nor would he want them to.

He settled down to work. The report Greifswald wanted was already long finished, of course – Eisenberg’s team had painstakingly analysed and sorted through all the background information. But it wouldn’t help. The people pulling the strings behind the trafficking ring were much too slick to commit crimes they could be traced back to. Eisenberg’s team’s only hope of an arrest was to catch the henchmen red-handed, and they’d just missed their chance. It would be a long time before they got a similar opportunity, if indeed they ever did.

He picked up the driving licences of the men who’d been at the wheel in the suspicious vehicles. As he predicted, they all denied being en route to the meeting point, even producing papers to show that they had been contracted to pick up cargo documents at the port. The idea that somebody would dispatch five couriers at the same time was unlikely, but obviously it wasn’t a crime. Their statement was absolutely watertight. The fact that three of the five drivers had previous convictions was just as unhelpful.

All that left them with was the two guards. Charged with human trafficking, they were looking at many years behind bars, but naturally their lawyers had advised them to clam up. They knew their lives would be worth nothing if they betrayed their employers.





Eisenberg sighed. He glanced at the clock. Half five. Normally he didn't pay much attention to office hours, but today he wasn't going to get much done, so he shut down his computer and went home.

His small one-bedroom apartment in Altona seemed even emptier than usual – maybe because he was home earlier than he normally was. Looking around, he realised that his apartment was more or less identical to an anonymous holiday let, barring a few photos of his two children on the bookcase and a few books. This impression was reinforced by the antiseptic smell of detergent liberally applied, which Consuela, his Portuguese cleaning lady, left behind her every Thursday.

He went into the bathroom and gazed at himself in the mirror. His dark salt-and-pepper hair was still thick, but his face suddenly seemed old and tired. Had those creases above his eyebrows always been that deep? When did his cheeks get so slack? Only the crooked, slightly flattened nose still seemed familiar – like an asymmetrical crag that had defied the ravages of time.

He heated up some instant soup. As a general rule he didn't eat at home, usually contenting himself with a sandwich at the office or a takeaway kebab. It felt strange to eat sitting alone at his kitchen table, which was much too big for him.

Eisenberg had practically no private life. He had always thought he didn't need one. After a hard day's work he'd hit the gym, maybe watch a bit of TV, then go to bed early, get up early and go for a run before clocking back in at the office. He had long been proud of this way of life, which seemed somehow ascetic.





Now, suddenly, he had the feeling that he'd missed out on something essential.

He wondered whether to phone his children. Michael was twenty-four, studying engineering in Karlsruhe. Emilia, three years younger, was training as a nurse. She was still living with her mother in Munich, and Eisenberg definitely didn't want to dial that number. He could call Michael, but what would they have to talk about? Was he going to complain about his botched operation and the dressing-down he got from his new boss?

Switching on the TV, he stared at the flickering images for a while, until he noticed he was watching an early evening serial he had absolutely no interest in. He turned it off again and went over to the bookcase. Police manuals, a few biographies and books about history and philosophy that Iris had given him years ago as gifts. She had always been a voracious reader, but she'd taken all her books with her when she moved out. Which was ages ago now. He could still see her face clearly in his mind's eye: full lips, high cheekbones, gently slanting brown eyes, long dark hair.

He picked up a book, then put it back and took another one, but nothing could hold his attention. His apartment suddenly seemed cramped – maybe he should go and get a beer somewhere. He could meet up with a colleague – Udo Pape, perhaps – but then it would seem like he wanted a shoulder to cry on. For Christ's sake, he thought, he was hardly the only person to live alone. How difficult could it be to find something meaningful to do with his spare time?

Eventually he realised he had to talk it over with someone who had nothing to do with the case, someone neutral who



would be able to give him advice. He considered for a moment, then dialled a number.

‘Erik Häger?’

‘Hi Erik, it’s Adam.’

‘Hey, what a surprise! I haven’t heard from you in ages.’

Eisenberg had studied with Erik Häger at the police academy in Münster. After graduating they’d kept in touch, although their careers had taken very different paths. While Eisenberg had followed the traditional course with the local force in Hamburg, Häger had gone directly to the BKA, the central federal office, at Wiesbaden. By now he was head of the BKA’s Security Group in Berlin, who were responsible for protecting members of the national constitutional bodies. Eisenberg told his old friend about the failed operation.

‘Sorry if I’m whining at you, but I just need an independent opinion. What do you think I should do?’

‘The question isn’t so much what you *should* do but what you *want* to do. If I’ve understood you correctly, your boss is an idiot. Even if you did make a mistake giving the order to attack . . .’

‘So you think it was the wrong decision?’

‘I think that’s a pointless question. Personally I’ve made plenty of decisions which, in hindsight, I’m not altogether happy with. You can never know what would have happened if you’d behaved differently. If the girl had died, you’d never have forgiven yourself. Now you can’t forgive yourself for not arresting the guys running the show. It’s all just part of the job. The key point here is that this Greifswald bloke doesn’t trust you. The way you’ve described him, it sounds like he’s totally unfit for a leadership role. If you want I can try and dig up some dirt, find out about all the times he’s dropped the ball.’

‘No, let’s leave it. I’d rather not piss him off.’

‘If you say so. But you’ve got to choose between fight or flight.’

‘Well, it can’t be fight,’ said Eisenberg after a brief pause. ‘For one thing, Greifswald’s got a friend somewhere high up in local government, the one who set him up in that job in the first place. And for another, I don’t feel like squandering my time and energy on internal power plays. I don’t have the ambition or the talent for that. I want to arrest criminals. That’s my job, and I’m not going to stop until I retire.’

Häger laughed.

‘If I know you, you’ll keep going even after that! But it looks like the only option left is a transfer.’

‘If you know me, you’ll realise I don’t cave in that easily. Plus the trafficking case isn’t over yet. It’s only just beginning.’

‘You wanted my advice. This is it: unless Greifswald changes his mind, you’re not going to play much part in cracking that trafficking ring, and you’ll only end up getting demoralised. So put in for a transfer. You’re far too good a policeman to stagnate under an incompetent boss. I’d snap you up for the Security Group in a heartbeat, except that we’ve just gone through a round of job cuts and we’re still under pressure to hand over some of our duties to another department. But I can ask around, if you like?’

‘I don’t know. I always feel like such a coward throwing in the towel.’

‘Come on, be honest: what’s annoying you is that Greifswald suggested it first. You’d have been happy to chuck it in, but now you’ll be doing what he wants, and that’s not how you think people should behave towards arseholes.’

Eisenberg hesitated a moment.



‘Yeah, you’re right. Doing what he wants really sticks in my craw.’

‘Maybe it’s not what he really wants.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Think about it. Presumably he knows you well enough to realise how pigheaded you are. Let’s assume he was just trying to make you fall in line, but that he definitely doesn’t want to lose you. Suggesting a transfer might have been a psychological trick to make you stay. It’s not in his interest to scare off all his employees, and an unusually high quota of transfer requests would be bad for his image. He wants everybody to know that he’s the boss, but he won’t want anybody to leave off their own bat. At some point he’ll probably start giving you small operations again, and act like it’s some big favour. He’s trying to bring you to heel.’

‘Hm. I didn’t look at it like that. I’ve got to admit, that does sound like him. Now I’m even less keen to work for him.’

‘Then get a transfer. How old are you now? Fifty-two? That’s not too old to start afresh. With your experience you’ll thrive in pretty much any agency. Maybe they’re looking for the head of a criminal investigation unit somewhere. Wouldn’t that suit you?’

‘I don’t want to end up out in the sticks, though. And all the Hamburg-based roles are taken.’

‘You’re a bit stuck then, eh?’ Häger gave a dry laugh. ‘OK, well, I’ll keep my ear to the ground. If I hear of something suitable I’ll give you a shout.’

‘Thanks, Erik. For the advice, too.’

‘It’s a pleasure. Who knows, maybe you’ll end up in Berlin. Then we’ve got to get another beer.’

‘Sounds good.’



Eisenberg felt better after their conversation. Even the fact that his old friend hadn't pretended the decision to attack was categorically the right one was strangely comforting. He watched the news and an old Humphrey Bogart movie then went to bed. Before he fell asleep, he thought about the girl who had cost him the operation, and how she too would be lying in a comfortable bed tonight, with the opportunity to see her family again.

That was something, at any rate.