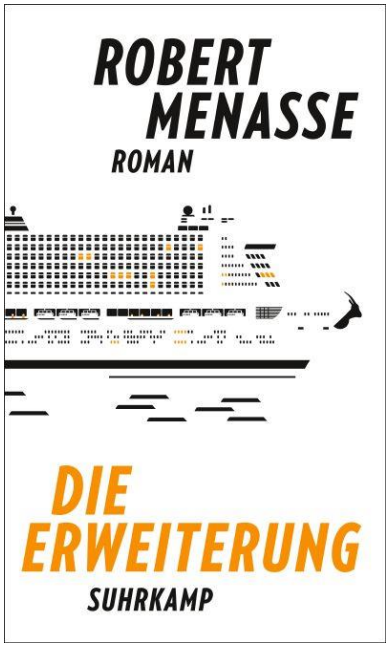

Robert Menasse

Enlargement

Novel

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Part I

The whole and its opposing parts

1

This is a name to remember: Fate Vesa.

On 6 September 2019 he made history. Or at least the sort of history that a poet can make in a world which has slipped from the grasp of political leaders. He came up with an idea, but had no inkling of the momentum this idea would trigger.

He was in the room when the Albanian prime minister was on the phone to the French president.

"*Avec respect, Monsieur le Président*," the prime minister barked down the line. "*Ta dhifsha suratin!*"

This was an obscene, but everyday curse in Albania, often uttered lightly. In conversation between statesmen it was unthinkable, however, as a tentative translation would be: "I shit in your face!" The sentence that followed – now hissed rather than barked – was almost elegant by comparison: "*Emri tu harroftë!*" – "Let your name be forgotten!"

"*Excusez. Je ne comprends rien à vos simagrées.*"

The telephone call didn't lead to a diplomatic incident, or at least nothing more serious than the resentment that already existed between the two countries. This was, of course, because the Albanian prime minister had cursed in his mother tongue, while the French president, although he'd brought in the Sherpa – his diplomatic adviser and the Balkans expert at the foreign ministry – didn't have an interpreter fluent in Albanian for the call. After all it was well known at the Élysée Palace that the Albanian prime minister spoke perfect French – quite normal in Albania where nobody, from anarchist artist to dictator, could get anywhere without having studied in Paris.

The prime minister, known by his inner circle as "ZK" (*Zoti Kryeministër*), or simply "Boss", abruptly ended the call and, in a state of great agitation, immediately asked his advisers what the French president's name was. The expression on his face and his outstretched palms signalled that he wasn't after an answer. All those present in the room remained silent. He gave a nod of satisfaction. *Emri tu harroftë!*

The day before, the French president had used his veto in the European Council to prevent the EU from embarking on accession negotiations with Albania. ZK had won votes by promising his people to take Albania into the European Union. But now Albania remained a candidate without substantial prospects, and first would have to fulfil further conditions, face more and more monitoring and assessments of reforms by EU delegations, and be confronted

with new lists of demands, giving in to which would prompt severe criticism from the nationalists.

Then the prime minister asked what the name of the Chinese president was, using gesturing to his advisers to say it out loud. Eagerly they responded in unison: Xi! Xi!!! Xi Jin!... Ping!

Yes! China. Correct, the press officer Ismael Lani said. Albania had its own history, a certain tradition–

"Tradition?" the prime minister exclaimed hotly. "I shit on tradition. Albanian history is nothing but a long nightmare of foreign control and oppression, occupation by Turks, Greeks, Italians, Germans! And communist dictatorship. A dictator who tried to be more Chinese than Mao Zedong did isn't tradition. And then the mafia…"

It was interesting that he mentioned the mafia too, as it was a taboo subject. "No, we don't have any tradition," he continued. "We wake up from a long nightmare, only to be punched so hard in the face by Europe that we're stunned and immediately sink into the next one. China is now just a piece of realpolitik in this game. But…"

ZK's advisers exchanged glances in silence.

But?

Before the prime minister could go on speaking, Ismael Lani piped up: "But… but… you can't put it like that, *Zoti Kryeministër*… you can't say that publicly… no tradition… no history… all I will say is: Skanderbeg. Our national hero! That's our history, the memory of him, the proud tradition that keeps our nation upright!"

The boss made a scornful, dismissive wave of the hand. "Skanderbeg. I see. Dear Ismael, please go over the window and look outside."

"Yes. And?"

"Tell me what you see. Can you see Skanderbeg?"

"Yes, I can see him."

"What's he doing?"

"Nothing. What should he be doing?"

"He's doing nothing, did you say? Exactly. What should he be doing indeed? I mean, he's just a statue people walk past in the square out there. Can you see a single passer-by looking up at him? And his helmet and sword are in a museum in Vienna. A man from the sixteenth century–"

"Fifteenth century!" Ismael Lani butted in.

“A man from the fifteenth century – is that how I’m going to lead the country into the future? Should I now raise a sword too?”

Silence. Until Fate Vasa, a diffident man and the first ever poet in the world to be part of a leader’s think tank (the prime minister was peculiar in his choice of personnel, with five artists in his team of advisers) made a contribution that elicited laughter and applause: “The sword as a metaphor of course! Skanderbeg’s helmet and sword, what do these stand for? For the idea of a united Albania. That’s why he’s our national hero, because he was the first man to unite the Albanian tribes. So now it all boils down to the following signal, and I stress the word ‘signal’. If the Europeans think that Albania is too small to take seriously at present, then you’ll have to draw Skanderbeg’s sword, as it were – symbolically, I mean, as a gesture. Greater Albania! The Germans were permitted to unite, so why not us too? With the Albanians in Kosovo and the Albanians in Macedonia… We’ll advance this claim, and what will happen? Is that what the EU wants? A new fuse attached to the Balkan powder keg? In a flash it will be prepared to make concessions and launch into accession negotiations.”

The boss looked pensively at Fate, this strange man who wrote the most beautiful poetry, created art, and who was so ugly, a mishap of nature. He looked at him for a long moment, then nodded.

Press officer Ismael Lani said, But–

The boss shook his head and Ismael fell silent.

This was the beginning of the story. A few months before the major Balkan conference in Poznań, Poland. A fuse.

2

It was only a few days after Mary, mother of God, appeared to his wife that Jaroslaw already knew he would have to divorce her. He realised that a man could no longer be happy with this woman, nor would he be able to build a political career for himself, not even in Poland. But the catalyst to finally get divorced was also the obstacle: this once cynical woman, who would agree to anything so long as it guaranteed her a life of luxury, was now, enlightened by the mother of God, unwilling to consent to breaking the marriage concluded before God in a holy sacrament.

Adam Prawdower closed the book. Did he want to read on? Everyone was talking about this novel, a *roman à clef* about the political elites in the capital. Was a certain deputy gay and thus susceptible to blackmail? It wasn't clear who the deputy was, but everyone had their suspicions. Was a high-ranking official in the ministry of economic development really corrupt? Was he passing on EU subsidies to his own firms that were being managed for him by figureheads? Who was meant? Was a member of the government – which one? Everybody knew: him! No: him! – having an affair with a party secretary who had suddenly been given a highly paid job with the Polish railways?

It was a trashy novel, full of slander but untouchable, because those slandered were not clearly identifiable. It was fiction, crudely playing to widespread prejudices, a game of the imagination which continued on social networks, babble and gossip – who is the politician whose wife had a vision of the Virgin Mary? Who is the gay deputy?

Was this what all of Warsaw was talking about? Rumours? Adam couldn't believe it. Nobody was talking about the real scandal being played out in full sight: the political treachery of the prime minister. All the ideals from their former struggle were being betrayed and sold out. What they had fought for and achieved, all of it was being annulled and destroyed. But the voters were discussing the identity of the politician whose wife had seen a vision of the Virgin Mary. It was depressing.

Dorota was worried. Adam was more withdrawn and ponderous than usual. Prince of Darkness, she called him, but he didn't laugh. When was the last time she'd seen him laugh? Saturday three weeks ago when he came back home from a long walk with a puppy in tow.

What's that?

A Polish Hound, *Ogar Polskí*. You know that canine boutique "Une vie de chien" in Avenue de la Chasse? I was wandering past and saw him in the window.

He put the little dog down on the terrace, shoved it and laughed. He laughed when the dog fell over and got back up again.

Dorota was furious.

I've only got three months maternity leave left. What then?

The hunting hound of kings, he said. He'll protect you.

You? Who's you? Our son and I? Why don't you say "us"?

He shoved the puppy and laughed.

Now they had a dog that peed inside the house. This didn't bother Adam as he came home late from work, then spent ages sitting on the terrace or in his room, brooding in his typical posture – head bowed, left hand on his damaged ear – or reading and making notes.

Dorota loved her husband. She had to understand his aloofness, even when he said, "I love you too!", and how hard he found it to be effortlessly intimate. And she did understand, but sometimes she wondered why? Why must she understand? Must was not a category of love, was it? But then her husband would suddenly say things that made her feel closer to him again, and she would be caught once more in the trap of understanding. Then silence again. And what she refused to understand, would never understand, was the hatred he'd been absolutely obsessed by recently. He would not let it cool down, dismissing every word of reason or appeasement.

"No, it's not hatred. It's loyalty. We took an oath."

The hatred was poisoning his soul and might even destroy their marriage, if not their entire lives. In her view it was completely irrational, this hatred of his former best friend Mateusz – the two had sworn to be "blood brothers" when they were children – now prime minister of the Polish republic.

Dorota thought it crazy and totally unnecessary to ruin a lifelong friendship because of an accusation of betrayal, which she did not believe to be entirely justified. Was it really betrayal if differences emerged between the political ideals of youth and the possibilities of realpolitik? Did it amount to betrayal if you insinuated that a childhood friend who had made it to the top held views which he had never actually expressed?

"He has expressed them! He's said it quite clearly."

"Clearly? Electoral rhetoric!"

Adam and Dorota had nothing to do with internal Polish politics. They lived in Rue d'Oultremont, Merode, Brussels, in a comfortable house with a beautiful back garden full of large rose bushes that the vendor of the house had been especially proud of. This is *Rosa* "Doktor Kurt Waldheim", named after the former UN secretary-general who sent a message to

aliens in space, remember? No? Must've been before your time. This rose is called "Doktor Wolfgang Schüssel", which I brought from home in Lower Austria. Very susceptible to aphids, unfortunately. You can treat it quite successfully with nettle tea to begin with, but then you need a strong tobacco spray.

Do all your roses have PhDs? Dorota asked.

This one doesn't, it's my absolute favourite: *Rosa* "Wiener Blut", deep-red blooms, no thorns. You can lie down in this rose like it's a soft bed.

Swim in blood, you mean?

The vendor laughed. He left them a canister of pesticide to treat Waldheim, Schüssel and Wiener Blut – "so you can always enjoy them" – and Dorota loved the garden, the roses, the washed concrete patio with the barbecue that rusted in the Brussels rain, but still did its job when Adam brought back the sausages from Boucher Lanssens, the best in Brussels. They felt lucky that to be enjoying not just a good life, but a purposeful one too; they had vocations they fully identified with, rather than any old jobs. Adam worked for the European Commission, in the directorate-general for neighbourhood and enlargement negotiations, where she met him when she came to Brussels as a trainee after studying Law in Bologna and a masters in European and Transnational Law at the University of Göttingen. Her father was Polish and had fled to the West following the imposition of martial law; her mother was Italian. Dorota had just turned seven when the Iron Curtain fell. She had visited her grandparents in Poland a few times, with her parents to begin with, and later on her own. She was Italian, but also felt herself to be of Polish descent, even though she had not an ounce of sympathy for Polish patriotism or nationalism. Dorota recalled her unease sitting opposite her grandfather as he spat out a torrent of hatred against "the Germans" while she was at Göttingen and in love with a fellow student called Hermann. How happy her grandparents were when soon afterwards she married Adam, a Pole from a well-known family. They were delighted they were still around to see it, they said.

You're a European official! You haven't got a role in Warsaw anymore! Why are you bothered by domestic Polish politics?

Domestic politics? For God's sake, Dorota, we're preparing for the Balkan conference in Poznań. If only you knew how often they interfere. Phone calls, emails–

Does the prime minister call you?

Not personally. He's got his people who he orders around like an army. And an army doesn't come with peaceful intentions.

Adam's and Mateusz's families had been closely linked for generations. Ever since the January uprising in 1863, in fact, when their grandfathers' grandfathers fought together in the same partisan unit against the Russians; the stories told in their families went that far back. Their paternal grandfathers then fought underground in the Armia Krajowa, the Home Army, against the Nazis. After 1981 their fathers were resistance fighters too, this time against the communists who had imposed martial law and subdued Solidariność. They built up the underground army, Fighting Solidarity, an arms workshop, a pirate radio station and an intelligence service. They kept changing hideouts, organised sabotage, detonated bombs, and kidnapped and killed officers from the Służba Bezpieczeństwa, the Polish secret service who tortured and murdered citizens in their basement rooms. The fathers they'd hardly known. Adam and Mateusz were both thirteen when their fathers went underground; their mothers only saw their husbands a few times after that, in conspirators' flats or a forest hideaway they were taken to by fellow partisans. Adam's mother became pregnant, and six months later so did Mateusz's. Both gave birth to girls who were to grow up like sisters. But Adam and Mateusz were sent off to the Brothers in Poznań, the best protection for the sons of resistance fighters who had now been identified by the SB. And so they were handed over to the dominion of the Holy Roman Church, to which not even the secret service had easy access, and embarked on their training in the priesthood. Adam's Jewish father was kept quiet and the boy was baptised, as it stated in his papers, which was sufficient. And this was the point at which the two young men started to become estranged, a development that would escalate into hatred. Looking back, Adam realised that everything dated from this time.

When they were fourteen they swore the Fighting Solidarity oath before a representative of the underground movement sent by their fathers. After being blessed by the Pater Prior, they were left alone with this man who called himself Konrad. It was only much later that they would understand the meaning of this *nom de guerre*.

Konrad took them down into the catacombs of the Basilica of St Peter and St Paul, to the sarcophagus of Bolesław VI, Duke of Greater Poland. Was it pure chance, or was Konrad aware of Adam's Jewish heritage? In 1264 Bolesław issued the Statute of Kalisz, an edict of toleration defining the status of Jews in Poland and laying the foundation for their relatively autonomous existence, which lasted until the end of the eighteenth century. Amongst other things the Statute set out punishments for the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues, and rules for punishing anyone accusing the Jews of ritual murder. It also regulated Jewish commercial activity and guaranteed the inviolability of their persons and property.

Whenever Adam thought back to this moment later, he could not believe it was a coincidence that they'd sworn their oath before the mortal remains of this Jewish-friendly Duke of Greater Poland. The men of the resistance, those fighting for a free Poland, never left anything to chance. If they used weapons, it was always planned and well thought-out, never spontaneous. They were likewise calculated in their use of symbols, the signs they placed. For Adam such certainty was of great importance.

Konrad revealed that they were not destined for the priesthood, of course; their calling was a different one.

It was cold, very cold, and although Adam and Mateusz were only wearing their white seminary shirts, they were glowing in their desire to be accepted – here, in the underground of holy Poland – into the army of their fathers. They put their arms around each other's shoulders and then their preliminary training began. Konrad talked about – girls.

The time had come, he said, for them to be prepared. They would start developing an interest in girls, they would fall in love, experience their first disappointment, wrangle with their insecurity, suffer anxiety, but all of this pain would merely be the birth pangs of the freedom that they still had: the freedom to love. Love had many forms, you had to be ready for this, but you could not prepare yourself for it, plan your reactions apart from one: to keep asking yourself whether love was an emotional tempest that could make you lose control, or the foundation of unconditional solidarity. How certain can I be that the very person I love won't betray me, out of fear for their own life, or disappointment or revenge for insults suffered? If in doubt they must stay silent even if they're in love. That's all there was to say about this. But what they did need to be prepared for…

He paused, looked at them, pointed at Adam and asked, What colour is the sky?

Blue.

Wrong, Konrad said, completely wrong.

Astonished, puzzled, Adam and Mateusz huddled together more closely.

What you need to be prepared for, Konrad said, are the interrogations. And if you are interrogated, it has to be absolutely clear that you know nothing. You need to stick to this line consistently: you know nothing. What colour is the sky? I don't know. Look out of the window, because I don't know. Maybe it's blue, maybe it's grey, maybe it's black because storm clouds are gathering – how am I supposed to know what the colour of the sky is when I'm stuck in an interrogation cell? Why don't you look out of the window? You can answer the question yourself. The moment you begin answering innocuous questions, Konrad continued, you're already engaging with their questions, and soon you'll be responding to those which, in their

eyes and their protocols, make you guilty. So be absolutely clear on this point: you know nothing. And this starts with not even knowing the colour of the sky if they ask you. Tell them to look out of the window. That will give them the answer, but you don't know. Who are your friends? Come on, tell me, who are your friends, he said, pointing at Mateusz.

My friends… my friends… Mateusz said, looking at Adam and–

You don't know, Konrad said curtly. You don't know. Who knows who their friends are real, loyal friends, false friends, traitors who engineer a friendship with you – they know all of this much better. You cannot, mustn't give an answer. Let them consult their files, they've got informers, moles, they know better than you who your friends are. You don't know. You can't give an answer. No answer, understand? That's the trick: they begin with simple, banal questions and you too think, this is simple and harmless, I'll answer this and show my goodwill, a semblance of cooperativeness, that'll make me more credible – but that's the mistake, slipping into the trap of cooperativeness. What you have to make absolutely clear from the beginning, therefore, is: you don't know anything. Then the threats will come. We've got your sister. What do you say?

Please–

No, you don't beg. You don't say anything. Nothing. You must make it clear that you're not going to say anything. If you don't know anything, why should you suddenly know something because they've got your sister? You must make it clear that you'd rather be dead than say what colour the sky is. And that your sister being murdered isn't going to answer any questions. Only that way will you make it hard for them. If they realise that death means nothing to you. That not even the most severe threats will get them anywhere. They want answers? They're not going to get any from a corpse.

My sister, Adam said.

What about your sister? Konrad said. Let me tell you a story.

It was a story that in Adam's eyes turned the hero into a monster. Adam and Mateusz swore the oath "for life". But part of a puzzle, a black hole in Adam's soul, was still there.

Once upon a time there was a farmer called Erasmus, Konrad said. The Gestapo turned up and asked him about the partisans. Erasmus said nothing. They killed his son in front of him. Erasmus said nothing. They killed his daughter. Erasmus said nothing; he didn't even sigh. They killed his wife. Erasmus said nothing.

He saved lives, Konrad said, bringing his story to an end, the lives of his comrades.

It was all about this willingness to make sacrifices. The two boys had understood. Hand in hand they said, I swear.

But…

For a long time Adam failed to realise how much doubt was nagging away at him, doubt whose symptoms were recognised by his teachers but misunderstood. They thought that he, like some other seminarists, was having doubts about his calling to the priesthood, and they gave him charitable smiles. They knew, of course, that he was destined to become a soldier rather than a priest. But the doubt at work within him was over the oath he had sworn with Mateusz. How was it possible to live with this oath of loyalty, which committed you to such inhuman indifference towards the death of those to whom you'd also pledged something: love and loyalty? Would he, for example, be able to watch idly and silently as Mateusz was executed before his eyes? Could he really do that while he still felt there was a faint of hope of saving his friend's life? And vice-versa, would his best friend and comrade in arms Mateusz really watch silently if…

He asked Mateusz this question one night as they lay in their beds. Could you really do that?

It was freezing cold in the dormitory. Some mornings in winter the seminarists would wake up to rime on their blankets and pillows. But he had never felt as cold as that night. I would shoot you myself, Mateusz said, if you even said what colour the sky was.

Adam shuddered. At the same time he briefly felt shame, a burning bad conscience.

Of course he understood that it was all about protecting your comrades, not your friend's happiness, but Poland's freedom and the people's happiness. But…

At the time he had no words for this, only the sense of unease, the anxiety, the bewilderment with which he could only feel the unbearable contradiction: heroes were needed to establish a humane world, but how humane would the world be if it demanded inhumane acts from its heroes?

There mustn't be any traitors, he realised that. There could not be any doubt about it; there was no compromise. At the time he knew he would never betray Mateusz. But he also knew that Mateusz would not pay a groschen for him if he was abducted and a ransom demanded for his life, because "you don't pay for evil". That was what he said quite clearly.

But wasn't there the possibility of a compromise? As mad as it might sound, a compromise that would never cast doubt on their refusal to compromise?

Adam had sleepless nights. Although he didn't question the oath, at the same time he sensed Mateusz becoming ever more distant from him since they'd made the pledge that bound them in life and death.

He only understood around thirty years later. Or he thought he did. It was not his anxiety and self-doubt that had been the problem, but Mateusz's inability to doubt, his dogmatism, his self-righteousness, his willingness to sacrifice family and comrades, arguing that this would prevent him from betraying his people. Just as Mateusz would have watched impassively back then, without even a sigh, if his sister had been shot in front of his eyes, now he would look on if an anti-Semitic mob beat Adam up and spat on him.

As prime minister Mateusz fanned the flames of anti-Semitism "in defence of the Polish people". Poles were basically innocent. Germans and Jews tried to pin the blame for the Holocaust on the Polish people, but Jews were "accomplices". The term "Jewish accomplices", playing politics with anti-Semitism, was a disgrace as far as Adam was concerned. That was the moment he realised he'd been betrayed by the man for whom he would have sacrificed his life as an underground soldier. Had Mateusz forgotten the symbolic place where they'd sworn their oath? Before the sarcophagus of Bolesław VI, the protector of the Jews. And Adam's father, a Jew, had fought alongside Mateusz's father in the underground army too. Had he forgotten that? Adam was of Jewish heritage, which Mateusz was well aware of when they made their pledge together to Fighting Solidarity. He had forgotten everything, betrayed everything. They'd been protected while with the Brothers in Poznań; the seminary was a front rather than a schooling in religious fanaticism. Mateusz's militant Catholicism, his hatred of Jews, his hatred of Muslims, of all those of other faiths, showed that he'd betrayed his oath – his pledge to stand up for freedom – rather than remained faithful to it. Yes, they'd fought for freedom. And now, having risen to the head of government, he was leading the country as if it were still occupied, or occupied again, and run by others. By Jewish bankers and Brussels. This wasn't loyalty to the fight for freedom, it was a betrayal of the freedom they'd won.

He's insane, he's a loose cannon!

Who?

Listen to this, it's an interview with Mateusz:

I should like to remind people that we Poles were the first to actively oppose fascism. We Poles were the first to topple communism, the fall of the Berlin Wall was our doing too, and let me tell you that if the European Commission continues to criticise our

sovereign decisions and hinder our development, Poland will also be responsible for the end of the European Union.

The end of the European Union! Please, Adam! He's a bigmouth! Who takes any of that seriously.

The *Financial Times,* for one.

Adam had come back home late again; his son Romek was already in bed. He sat on the terrace with the paper, said he'd already had a *gezond* sandwich at Exki, and wasn't hungry. A Wyborowa, on the other hand, would be just the ticket. The dog, who he'd named Maladusza, leaped up onto his lap and Adam tickled him behind the ears.

Don't you want to look in on Romek? Dorota said. He's already asleep. Give him a gentle kiss. So he doesn't forget the smell of his father at least.

It was one of the last balmy evenings of the year; neither of them wanted to get up from the patio and go inside, to bed. When the candle in the lantern went out the dots of light in the sky became visible and Adam said: The problem is that Mateusz thinks Erasmus is a Polish farmer.

3

It was 19 October 2017 when the alienation between the blood brothers ultimately turned into hatred.

On that day a man entrered the post office branch on plac Defilad in the centre of Warsaw, carrying a canister of accelerant in his left hand, a hefty ghetto blaster in his right and a linen shoulder bag with the words "*Nikt nie ma prawa być posłuszny*", a freebie from the Tarabuk bookshop. When he got to the counter he carefully put down the canister and stereo, and took a dozen letters out of the shoulder bag which, to the astonishment of the post-office worker, were addressed to the prime minister, her deputy, members of the Rada Ministrów (the Polish cabinet), the editors-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* as well as other leading journalists. With excessive meticulousness the counter clerk put each of the letters on the scales, even though they were all clearly the same size and weight, then studied the names of the addressees.

The man patiently watched as the letters were weighed, had stamps put on them and then were postmarked ever so gently, as if the clerk were trying to avoid hurting the distinguished recipients of the letters.

The postal worker later told police that he hadn't noticed the man had a jerry can on him. When he was at the counter he'd already put the canister down, and when the man left the clerk wasn't watching him, he added, because he'd already gone to consult with his boss. But suspicious, yes, of course the man had appeared suspicious, absolutely, because of the people the letters were addressed to. Who wrote letters to the government? Nutters or busybodies. Maybe even a bomber? And the shoulder bag. He'd only been able to read the word *posłuszny* – obedient – and he'd thought that was strange. Anyway, he'd taken the letters straight to the branch manager, because since 2008 they'd had to check out recipient and sender in such cases and notify the Agencja Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego, the domestic intelligence service.

In which cases?

These cases. When there was something fishy. Being only a minor official, of course he couldn't pass judgment, so he took it to the branch manager so that a higher–

When a man appeared in front of you with a petrol can you didn't think it necessary to raise the alarm at once?

I didn't see the can, I swear by the Holy Virgin Mary I didn't see it. But I did take the matter to a higher…

At any rate, the letters never arrived.

The man, who according to what he'd written down, was called Piotr Szczęsny, paid with a high-value banknote, took a few leaflets out of his "obedient" shoulder bag, flyers entitled "I protest", said, These are for you! picked up the canister and stereo, and left the post office. He didn't bother with his change

He paid with a Zygmunt, the clerk said, a 200-złoty note, and didn't bother with the change, he just didn't bother. Of course the clerk had immediately gone to his boss and then adjusted the daily takings, of course… he was never going to keep… he hastily added. Anyway…

Piotr Szczęsny stood outside the Palace of Culture in Defilad Square and handed out his flyers. "I protest". In fifteen points he accused the governing PiS party of restricting citizens' rights, agitating against minorities, gagging the media, breaking the constitution, overturning the separation of powers and destroying the independent judiciary.

Piotr was five years older than Mateusz, who at the time was deputy prime minister and would become prime minster less than three months later. They knew each other from Fighting Solidarity times, in the last months of the underground before the fall of communism.

> *This isn't what we fought for, Mateusz. You were entrusted to me, who was older. We fought against an authoritarian regime for freedom. When communism was defeated I'd never have believed that it would ever return. Now I realise that the authoritarian system doesn't come back as communism, but anti-communism.*

But this letter, like all the others that Piotr Szczęsny sent, was never delivered; they ended up in the intelligence service's archive.

Piotr Szczęsny pressed play on his stereo and turned up the volume. While the song "*Kocham wolność*" – "I love freedom" – blasted out across the square, Piotr Szczęsny took the jerry can, unscrewed the top, put it down again and wiped his face with the back of his hand and his forearm. The he raised the canister again and poured the accelerant over his head, held it to his chest and let the liquid run down his clothes, lifted it higher, soaked his face, spat, gasped, took a deep breath and shook the canister, the liquid splattering and gurgling – how long it took for twenty litres to be emptied. "There's so little I can do / I love and understand freedom / I cannot give it up" – he raised the canister as high as he could, shaking it all the while, the liquid burned his eyes, his lips, the mucous membranes inside his mouth, and now it was his tears, this stinging liquid running down his face. "I had so little / I have so little / I can lose it all / I can…" – he saw blurred and distorted grey figures in the twilight, nobody was

looking his way. Softly Piotr sang along to just one line of the song: "… remain alone. I love freedom."

He put down the empty jerry can. The people in the gathering gloom were mere silhouettes, dark spectres, the contours of the cars like huge black beetles with bright, searching eyes. Suddenly the square shimmered a reddish-violet colour, as if a toxic mist had descended. It was from the spots that now lit up the Palace of Culture in violet, blue and red. The Palace of Culture, "Stalin's gift to the Poles", at his back. And before him, the neon lights of bustling ulica Marszałkowska.

> *Dear editor! I fought in the underground for Poland's freedom. This fight was obviously a fight for the freedom of the press too. Countless people, the very best, sacrificed their lives for this. I don't believe they would have been prepared to do so had they known that the struggle would end with the freedom of lies prevailing, which is barely any different from the party press that was spoon-fed during the era of dictatorship. As editor-in-chief, you described the overturning of the separation of powers as a "patriotic act" and the destruction of the independent judiciary, for which many people had sacrificed their lives, as "the will of the people" – what does that remind you of? And what do you see when you look in the mirror? You can still fight and I want to encourage you to do so. You have less to fear than the underground army who fought for your freedom, and who you are now betraying.*

This letter wasn't delivered either.

The song ended with a quiet rustling as the cassette ran on blankly. Piotr had only recorded "Kocham wolność". The sound of silence, then the click of a lighter.

Only a few people heard the piercing scream, the brief, shrill, siren-like noise that Piotr Szczęsny made as he was transformed into a grotesquely dancing, blackened body in a cloak of wild flames. But those who did hear him would never forget it.

The pedestrians who were nearby froze; only one man tried to approach the burning figure. It was a crazy image, this man leaping forward, hitting the human fireball twice with his briefcase, as if this could put the flames out, jumping back, then forward again, swinging his briefcase once more until the sleeve of his coat began to burn, at which he threw himself on the ground and wiggled out of the coat.

On that day Adam Prawdower, as a representative of the European Commission, directorate-general for enlargement, had come from Brussels to Warsaw to take part alongside

government representatives and members of the opposition in a forum, entitled: “The future of the EU: enlarge, consolidate or cut back?”

On the way to the Palace of Culture he saw the burning man. He saw the crowd that had gathered, heard screams and sirens, flashing blue lights washing the scene, the flames blazing and licking in toxic colours on a black body that rose up and then sank. No, that wasn’t a person, it couldn’t have been a person, it must’ve been a dummy being burnt there, Was it a demonstration, a protest?

No, it was indeed a human being on fire. The sirens, the blue lights, now they were there, the fire brigade, the police. He saw others try to extinguish the man with their coats, a blanket, bottles of water. They leaped forwards and fell back again immediately. It was hopeless. Now Adam rushed forwards, once again the soldier prepared to risk… and threw himself on the burning man at the very moment when the fire brigade, which had dashed into place, covered both of them in a blanket of fire-fighting foam.

And so Adam came out of it with singed hair and eyebrows, which grew back, as well as a burn running from his ear down his neck, essentially a large burn blister, like the blisters on the palms of his hands, which completely healed. “*Restitutio ad integrum*,” was the satisfied conclusion of Dr Rensenbrink, the specialist at the Europa Hospital in Brussels, where Adam was treated when he got back. You were lucky, Meneer Prawdower. And the area where some scar tissue has formed – here on the ear and beneath the auricula, well, let me put it this way: having a sensitive earlobe isn’t absolutely vital! Or –

Adam looked at the doctor in surprise.

Rensenbrink laughed: At any rate it’s not so bad that you could say the fire made a pig’s ear of it.

Flemish humour, Adam thought charitably, almost touched.

Adam hadn’t recognised Piotr when he threw himself on him. Nor in the next couple of days he spent in the hospital having his burns treated did he find out who the man was whose life he’d tried to save. Can there be a stronger bond with an individual than this: he saved my life!? But Adam didn’t know that the man he’d thrown himself on was his comrade Piotr, his saviour in the days of the underground. What he read in the newspapers while in hospital angered him. Piotr S., so it said, was a “madman”, known to the authorities as a “lunatic”, as “mentally unstable”. And in an interview in the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Mateusz, the soon-to-be prime minister of Poland accused the opposition of “driving mentally unstable people to their deaths with their hysteria about the threat of a dictatorship”.

But then Adam learned who the “lunatic” was: Piotr Szczęsny, his and Mateusz’s comrade from their underground army days, and he couldn’t believe that Mateusz didn’t know this. A good friend of Adam’s, the city councillor Paulina Piechna-Wiekiewicz of the Liberal Party, who’d just come out of a meeting when Piotr turned himself into a human torch, picked up one of the flyers from the ground and posted it on Twitter, as well as the photograph of Piotr’s shoulder bag, which read: “Nobody has the right to obey. Hannah
Arendt”, and beneath it the logo of Tarabuk bookshop.

Paulina visited Adam in hospital.

You knew Piotr? she said.

Yes. How is he? Is he going to pull through?

He’s alive, but the prognosis isn’t good.

What can we do? But don’t tell me things like: We have to keep his memory–

We can be happy if it survives, the memory of him.

After ten agonising days Piotr Szczęsny died. Ten days during which the media kept banging on that he was mentally unstable, certifiable, depressive, manic and under the influence of conspiracy theorists who were ultimately responsible for his devastating death…

When Adam left hospital he wrote a letter to the deputy prime minister, his old friend Mateusz. Actually, it wasn’t a letter, it was a page from a newspaper with Mateusz’s interview. Adam had underlined a number of sentences and noted in the margin: Do you really believe that? Or: Have you forgotten what Piotr did for us, for me? Or: You’re saying this about a brave fighter? And right at the end of the interview, when Mateusz talked about patriotism and how Jews didn’t know what this was, but how they couldn’t make the Poles feel guilty, not even through self-immolation, Adam wrote in the margin: Tell me this to my face!

He put the page of the newspaper in an envelope and went to the post office on plac Defilad. The counter clerk took the letter, read the name of the addressee and plucked his ear thoughtfully. It wasn’t deliberate, but it looked as if were making fun of Adam, who was cautiously rubbing and tugging at the bandage covering the itchy burn on his ear. The clerk put the envelope on the scales very slowly, stuck on the stamp and postmarked it carefully. He fixed his gaze on Adam as he took the payment. Then he closed the window and put up a sign saying: “Please go to the nearest available counter”.

4

Impossible, monsieur, Catherine said. I'm afraid the system won't accept it.

What? Won't accept it? What do you mean?

If I put in work trip to Albania I can't bill for a flight to Greece, Monsieur, without a connecting flight to Albania, and then it immediately comes up, see: *Erreur!* Entry not possible. Quite apart from the fact that you haven't got approval. You need to have approval for the weekend before.

I have to have approval for a private weekend?

When it's connected to a work trip, yes, Monsieur Auer.

She pronounced his name in a way that sounded like Gruyère to his Austrian ear. Auer didn't like it. Was she doing it deliberately? Did she think it was funny?

The talks in Tirana took place from Monday to Wednesday, he said, irritated. The Saturday before that I flew to Corfu and took the ferry to Saranda in southern Albania. I thought it would be an opportunity to spend a weekend on the Albanian riviera… a private–

But it wasn't approved! If you travel on behalf of the Commission for political talks to a particular country, you can't just add on a weekend, those are the rules. Who are you meeting, who are you talking to there, how can we be sure you're not pursuing interests that–

Catherine, I was there in a private capacity. Please bear in mind that–

With due respect, I should like to remind you that–

Kindly note, that–

With choice politeness and grim patience he insisted that a private weekend by the sea had nothing to do with his work trip, but that the journey there must certainly be charged to the work trip.

I only spent a weekend on the coast! On my own! I could have just as well gone to the beach here at Knokke for the weekend and then flown first thing Monday morning from Brussels to Tirana. Where's the difference?

Karl Auer also pointed out that the ticket to Corfu was cheaper than one to Tirana, especially as there was no direct flight from Brussels to the Albanian capital, and that he'd paid for the ferry from Corfu to Saranda out of his own pocket, as well as for the hire car to Tirana.

Je suis désolé, monsieur, Je n'ai pas fait les règles, Je ne peux pas changer le système de MIPS.

Some things had changed, the least of these being that ever since Brexit Catherine had been communicating with colleagues in French, rather than English as in the past. *L'anglais*

est maintenant une petite langue en Europe, she said. *Qui d'autre que les rares Irlandais parlent anglais dans l'UE?*

Yes, some things had changed. Following the last EU elections, in which millions of Europeans had voted, a new Commission president, who hadn't even contested the parliamentary elections, was chosen by just two votes: those of the French president and German chancellor. This turned the European elections into a farce, and the new Commission president immediately caused everything to slip and slide. The Commission resembled a kaleidoscope doggedly being rotated until it ended up displaying a new pattern. Areas of responsibility were shifted between departments, tasks redefined, directorates-general renamed, long-serving officials sat down for ever-longer lunches in the restaurants on Rue Stevin or Rue Archimede, telling the "eleven", the new officials or the young "trainees" about the good old days when Jacques Delors was Commission president. Or they spoke of the Barroso era, which at least had been unintentionally funny sometimes, albeit only in retrospect! And after years in the directorate-general COMP (Competition), Karl Auer now found himself again in the directorate-general NEAR (Neighbourhood and Enlargement). Not exactly the top of his list. Even though first-class lawyers were obviously required to monitor the legal reforms of the accession candidates. From that perspective it was a career jump. But that wasn't important to Auer. He wasn't a career man; he wanted to be able to identify with his work. Some people thought this old-fashioned.

Just look at his suit, Catherine once said to colleagues in the canteen. Monsieur Gruyère has outfits that don't exist anymore. With pleated trousers, she giggled, and imitation leather belt. And the wide lapels, that's somehow so, I don't know, so *grand-père*. And then he's forever coming out with his *grand-père bons mots*. It made her shudder.

Karl Auer hadn't had much time to get to grips with the new department when this work trip cropped up: Albania, the six-monthly top-level discussions between EU negotiators with accession candidates. On the Commission's side that meant the director of NEAR and three high-ranking officials; for the Albanians, the prime minister, the ministers of foreign affairs, domestic affairs, justice and economics. Finally there were additional meetings with representatives from the opposition and NGOs. Auer then had the idea of flying out on Saturday morning rather than Monday, so he could spend a relaxing weekend – maybe an interesting one too – on an Albanian beach.

The European Anti-Fraud Office, OLAF, had just started investigating the Polish commissioner Janusz Wojciechowski, on the suspicion that he had failed to calculate travel

expenses correctly. He was said to have received 11,250 euros for undocumented travel expenses.

How ridiculous was that? The idea that a man of his position and with his income would need that money! But: the Commission is clean. There must be no doubt about this!

And so Auer paid for the flight himself and was only reimbursed for the hotel in Tirana and given his per diem for three days, Monday to Wednesday.

He made every effort to avoid showing irritation when he took his leave of Catherine with a curt bow and returned to his office. It wasn't the four or five hundred euros he'd had to fork out himself for technical reasons; what he felt aggrieved by was that there was something he couldn't tell Catherine, even though he got the impression she knew something or at least suspected it. Hadn't she dropped a hint?

No, she couldn't know anything, couldn't even suspect it. How would that be possible?

But the unspoken words were there, and he knew he couldn't utter them to Catherine, couldn't utter them to a single colleague, he couldn't trust anyone, he had to confine the words to his head, even though his heart was what first came to mind – but that sounded melodramatic. Thinking it through, he realised the responsibility lay with his head. In this he was an official through and through: first came responsibility, and only then the question of expertise.

Karl Auer wasn't the happy-go-lucky sort. Once, a long time ago, the image of a sensual, intensely romantic life had shimmered before his eyes for a fleeting moment, colourful and yet dark, like the leaded windows in the abbey church. He was sixteen or seventeen at the time, a pupil at Zwettl Abbey School and, as every year after the summer, he had to write an essay on "My favourite thing I did in the holidays". Besides the regular visits to the confessional, these were the "cookies" by which the teachers in those days could access their students' data. With great naivety the young Karl Auer wrote that as part of a Fellini season he'd seen *La dolce vita* at the cinema.

He wasn't sure if he'd really understood the film; the images rushed past him and, thrilled, he clutched the armrests of his seat as if he were in a rollercoaster wagon. But… Anita Ekberg in the Trevi Fountain, even the meaning of the film's title: "The sweet life" – he knew beyond any doubt, that this was at odds with his strict life.

And that's what he said in his piece, which was almost like a discursive essay, in highly bureaucratic language, foreshadowing his later career as a lawyer: *bearing in mind that… taking account of... weighing up…* And then came two terms he probably used for the very first time in an essay: *life plan* and *fascination*.

The sweet life, aha. When Father Gottfried handed the exercise books back to the pupils, he made Karl come up to the front of the class.

So, you're after the sweet life, are you? Then just remember this: work is what makes life sweet (a slap on the back of the head), not a half-naked woman in a Roman fountain! (the teacher certainly wouldn't have seen the film, but this scene was so famous that even he immediately associated it with the film's title.) You have to take responsibility for your life rather than dwelling on such fanciful ideas. But if – he smiled – if you're interested in Roman fountains, then I'd like you to learn by heart Conrad Ferdinand Meyer's poem "The Roman fountains". By tomorrow. You'll find the Meyer anthology in the school library. If I'm correct it contains the seventh version of the poem. You're lucky, it's the shortest one.

The father had spoken and already the Trevi Fountain was no more than a historical monument, desecrated by Fellini, whereas the Fontana dei Cavalli Marini in Villa Borghese had been ennobled by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer's 1882 poem, which Karl obediently recited the following day.

Back in his office, which he called the cell – even the higher-ranking officials had relatively small offices, furnished cheaply and spartanly – his gaze alighted on the wall calendar with today's aphorism: "Live each day as if it were your last".

What meaning would the bureaucracy in this building have then? When Karl Auer sat at his desk, switched on the computer and looked at the screen, he actually caught himself wondering what he would do if he knew this was the last day of his life. He certainly wouldn't be sitting here. Who would go to work if they knew it was the last day of their life? But whatever he decided on, it would be hugely stressful – all those things he ought to, wanted to, must experience. Or not. Only a few select pleasures. It would be stressful enough cramming everything into twenty-four hours, fewer, actually, if he got up at 6.30 as usual, which would mean six and a half hours wasted through sleep. Then there was the question of whether everything he wanted to experience was available, accessible, possible. That day he probably wouldn't even get a table in his favourite restaurant if he hadn't reserved in advance, before he knew it would be his last day. If, on the other hand, he knew he had only another ten years left to live – still substantially below his life expectancy – he could work with that. It would even be rewarding to think about how he might organise these remaining years. At any rate he wouldn't go to work anymore. What did that mean? Private pursuits. Till the final day.

Private. He'd told Catherine that his weekend by the sea before the meetings in Tirana had been private. Yes, private in the sense of lonely and joyless. When he arrived by ferry in

Saranda he was horrified. What had this place once been – a fishing village? No sign of that anymore. A port? It couldn't have been particularly significant as the docks were small and looked more like a coach park. Durres was Albania's important port – the village of Saranda itself had been totally destroyed by buildings thrown up haphazardly and wildly, hotels and apartment blocks punctuated by half-finished houses, their construction interrupted because the building contractors had either run out of money, or they couldn't or wouldn't pay the retrospective planning fees. It was a fake plasterboard Manhattan with a road cutting through it; in the traffic it took his taxi around forty minutes to crawl the 800 metres to his hotel. In front the hotel, though you needed to circumvent a building site, was the beach with a bar from which disco music boomed at deafening volume. If he wandered further down the beach to escape this racket, he came to the zone of the next bar playing a different sort of disco music. And where these two swells of noise met it sounded like jackhammers working at full pelt on a construction site, which amongst all the cranes and shells of buildings was somehow fitting, but ultimately the most brutal torture for tourists. Auer fancied getting drunk in the hotel bar – where in contrast to the beach it was so quiet you could have heard the blade of a guillotine fall – but this was too out of character. Making do with a glass of white wine, he was given a gruesomely perfumed Sauvignon, and only 100ml at that, which for an Austrian was a measure of schnapps, not wine. Having served the drink the barkeeper vanished without trace. After twenty minutes studying the empty glass, the empty bowl of nuts and the bottles of spirits on the wall behind the bar, illuminated by the blue background lighting, Auer went to reception to cancel his second night in this hotel, and order a car and a driver for nine o'clock the following morning. Then he asked if they could recommend a restaurant for dinner, good food, quiet, no pizzerias, please – he must have seen a dozen of these on the way to the hotel – and no junk food!

The receptionist marked a place on a map, which she then pushed over to him and said something that sounded like a sneeze.

I'm sorry?

She wrote the name of the restaurant on the map. "Haxhi", very nice, she said, excellent food, on the promenade–

How far is it from here?

Thirty minutes' walk, forty in a taxi, and taxis can't go right up to the restaurant, only as far as the start of the promenade, she said with scary cheerfulness. You're welcome.

Although Karl Auer was sometimes melancholy, he didn't tend towards depression. But when, after a long march through the noise and exhaust fumes, he finally pointed at the

photograph of *moules frites* on the menu at Haxhi and wondered why in Albania, of all places, he was ordering a dish he'd more than eaten his fill of in Brussels, he was – to put it gently – slightly vulnerable. He asked the waiter to recommend him a glass of white wine to go with the mussels, the waiter nodded, kissed his fingertips, hurried away and returned with a bottle. Auer was surprised at himself when he realised three-quarters of an hour later that he'd drunk the whole thing.

The following day the driver took him to Durres, but before that, on the driver's recommendation, he visited the ruins of the ancient city of Butrint, about twenty kilometres away. Classically educated, Auer was no philistine, but he did wonder why, under the scorching sun, he was traipsing round Roman and Greek excavations alongside thousands of tourists, a quarter of a century after he'd seen the Forum in Rome while interrailing. *Vendi I Trashëgimisë Botërore*, the driver said. What? *Vendi I Trashëgimisë Botërore*, how do you say? No idea. And then: thousands of tourists. This had astounded him back in Saranda. Why was this country so overrun with tourists from all over the world, when it had the image of being a black hole in the middle of Europe? Terra incognita, totally unknown after decades of isolation. Say Albania and nobody had a notion of the place, not even a clue, and if they did, they thought of the middle ages or cranky ideas such as the thousand small bunkers a crazed dictator had built. But mention that and you were labelled an Albania specialist… It was as puzzling as it was tiring.

Auer was happy when he got to Durres. He wasn't interested in seeing anything; he wanted to go straight to a hotel. The driver took him to Hotel Villa Pasucci: You will love it. It looked like a bad copy of the White House – bad because its dimensions were exaggerated, intimidatingly ridiculous, an impression that probably said more about Auer's mood than about the hotel itself. There were no more standard rooms available; they could only offer what they called a deluxe suite with a jacuzzi. Too tired to keep searching for hotels, he accepted. He let the driver go, ate in the hotel, which had a lovely garden, but unfortunately it was too chilly to eat outside. Seafood platter – wistfully it struck him that this was something you shouldn't eat alone; it was for sharing, for looking someone happily in the eye as you sensually sucked and slurped on the oysters, snails and lobster claws, and licked your fingers. In the light of the days that were to follow he could have seen this as a sign… Then he retired to his suite, taking the bottle of wine he'd only drunk half of. Once in the room, suddenly repulsed by alcohol, he poured the rest of the wine into the jacuzzi, which he then rinsed out because he was embarrassed by the idea of the cleaner finding a puddle of wine in the dry jacuzzi the next day.

He slept and early on Monday morning took a taxi to Tirana. That was his “private” weekend. As nice as two days spent in a vegetative state.

Ironically it was the working days in Tirana that turned out to be important for his private life. The job. The meetings. The negotiations. The days he would of course get expenses and per diems from the EU coffers. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, the days when he made a surprising discovery: his hazy longing found a target – a smiling face – he sensed a burgeoning energy, he noticed his heart pounding without anxiety, he felt – what? An old-fashioned word came to mind: mirth. In the morning, when he brushed his teeth and shaved, he saw in the mirror the face of a man who possessed something he didn’t know he had: a gift. He had something to give, and he received something that made him richer, stronger, more optimistic. The gift.

Dr Karl Auer fell in love.

He switched on his computer and also unlocked his smartphone. He’d taken a few snaps in Albania, and now was looking for a particular one: the cheerful face of Baia Muniq Kongoli, chair of the Albanian parliament’s judicial reform committee. A top lawyer who’d been a postgraduate at the European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder), with substance – for minutes Auer stared at the picture – with substance, substance, he was moved because he could embrace this term in its most profound meaning: substance. Baia!

Auer sat crying in his cell. Crying? Well, he had moist eyes, at least. So said Nathalie Bonheur, who’d put her head around the door to ask him – the only other smoker in this floor – whether he fancied a cigarette break on the fire escape. He declined the offer, sobbing–

He was sobbing?

Well, Nathalie said, he blew his nose but it sounded like a sob.

And he didn’t utter one of his dumb calendar sayings, like “The sun will shine again tomorrow”?

No, he just said he didn’t want a cigarette and–

And? What was wrong with him?

I don’t know. But I’ll find out.

5

Madame Delacroix is here, *Zoti Kryeministër*, from French television, with three men. They're waiting–

Yes, yes, show them into the conference room and tell them to set up the lighting and camera. I'll come as soon as I can.

I'll tell them. You'll be there in a few minutes.

As soon as I can.

OK. There's one more thing: she asked if you could do the interview in French, but otherwise she's got an interpreter.

I'll do it in French. Take them to the conference room. And please, Mercedes, bring me some coffee and raki.

To the conference room?

No, here.

Returning with coffee and raki, Mercedes found the prime minister dressed only in his pants. As far as his eccentricity was concerned, she was used to quite a lot; she was, after all, known as "robust Mercedes". But she was so shocked at the sight of the undressed prime minister that she almost dropped the tray she was carrying.

When Mercedes left the room she bumped into press officer Ismael Lani.

You can't go in there now. He's naked.

He's naked?

Mercedes frantically told him what she'd just seen. It spread through the building like wildfire. He's naked? What do you mean, naked? Did you just say, naked, him? Within minutes six close advisors from the prime minister's office were in the conference room, waiting for the boss.

But he took his time. Fate Vasa rang on the internal line, but he didn't pick up. He stood by the cabinet, where in one of the drawers he had a few changes of shirt, what he called his talking ties, for example the one with pigs, or the tie with a lion he liked to wear when meeting the heads of the EU delegation in Tirana. Right at the bottom was a sports bag for the now rare occasions when he did some exercise during the day or straight after work. From the bag he took a completely washed-out T-shirt, which had once been navy and was now more or less light blue, and gave it a sniff. Then a pair of black shorts with "You'll Never Walk Alone" embroidered on them in red, which he'd bought at the Old Trafford fan shop years ago. He put

them on, followed by the trainers he'd been meaning to throw away for ages. But when did a man in his position get the chance to buy new ones?

He knocked back the raki and sat at his desk.

He called for Mercedes. What was that supposed to be? I said, bring me a raki, not a drop of raki!

Do you want me… do you want me to bring you an–

Of course!

He thought it was appropriate to let Madame and her film crew wait another thirty or forty minutes. He drank his coffee and thought back to the conversation with Fate Vasa this morning about Skanderbeg's helmet.

Mercedes brought another drop, as she said sternly.

After a while the phone rang. He didn't pick up, but checked the time. Another five minutes, preferably ten. Eventually he stood up to go to the conference room. He hesitated briefly before taking off his old trainers.

After the French president had vetoed EU accession negotiations with Albania, Colette Delacroix from France 2 was sent to Tirana to interview the Albanian prime minister. She was the epitome of the elegant Parisian woman. Her blonde hair was a classic *carré court à la française* – making the prime minister immediately think of a golden helmet, but right now a helmet was permanently on his mind – then the cashmere suit, the silken stockings, the elegant pumps, and the only item of jewellery a brooch: an eagle made of red gold, its eye a small aquamarine. Did she have a particular reason for wearing this? If so, she'd been badly briefed. The Albanian eagle was a double one. And hovering above the double eagle on the Albanian coat of arms was Skanderbeg's golden helmet. Her haircut would definitely fit the bill here.

Colette Delacroix was an experienced and highly qualified journalist in her mid-forties, who had conduced legendary television interviews with statesmen, stateswomen and celebrities. In this respect she was anything but a mannequin defined by nothing other than Parisian chic. The way she looked, her *avoir de style*, was in the greatest possible contrast to the appearance of the prime minister, who came up to her with his hand outstretched. Aghast, she took his hand as if she was going to push him away again. This huge, burly man in a faded T-shirt and shorts, and barefoot – was he running a country? It might be a small country, but it was a country all the same, in the centre of Europe.

Turning away from her he asked in French: Why have the conference table and all the chairs been pushed to the side? Why's the sideboard with the drinks now in the corner? And where did those two armchairs in the middle of the room come from?

The cameraman said that they'd taken the two chairs from the foyer and arranged them like this because, if they filmed from here, the depth of the room… and the long table with all those chairs would provide too much detail, that's to say the picture–

The ZK laughed. You're not interested in reality, then? You want to film a conversation with me in my official room but you change it around beforehand? What else do you want? Shall I put on a suit? Wear a mask? Are you trying to trick your viewers?

I'm sorry, the cameraman said, but–

Put the room back as it was! Then we'll do the interview.

He looked at Madame Delacroix. *N'est-ce pas, Madame?* Am I an actor you have to build a set for?

He grinned as he watched the camera crew, helped by his office staff, put the furniture back, while he was being wired up with a microphone. Then he sat at the table and motioned to Madame to do the same.

Please take a seat here!

He tried as best he could to slouch in his chair.

The prime minister was determined to take revenge. He was humiliating this French journalist, but his target was the French president.

As if he couldn't care less about the vetoing of Albania's accession ambitions, he gave flippant answers, demonstratively bored.

Was he disappointed at the decision that the EU was not going to enter into accession negotiations with Albania?

No, he felt validated rather than disappointed.

Validated? In what way?

A statesman never put all his eggs into one basket, he said. It's something I've always maintained, and now I've been proved right.

Are you saying you've got other cards up your sleeve? What options are you thinking of?

I think your president or his usually well-informed advisers know the cards I still have. Let's just say: an ace and a joker.

Madame Delacroix carefully put a hand to the side of her hair, as if she were straightening her helmet. She gave a rather tortured smile.

Seeing as Albania's EU accession had become a more remote prospect, she said, was he worried this might cause him domestic problems politically? A strengthening of the opposition, the nationalists?

Your president's decision has actually caused the population to get behind the government. Domestic problems? I mean, really! Have you seen any yellow vests here? And if you ask me about the nationalist opposition, I don't see them strengthened, but perhaps the nationalist in me has been boosted.

Madame Delacroix looked at him in bewilderment, visibly searching for a reaction, a sentence, a question. After a brief yawn he continued: But this doesn't mean I can't see the bigger picture. As you may know, our picture here isn't particularly big, so traditionally we're a cosmopolitan, open-minded people.

Glancing at her notepad with the pre-prepared questions, Madame Delacroix took a deep breath and asked the following: You're an artist, you've had international exhibitions, even one at the Guggenheim in New York. Why did you give up your art to go into politics?

I haven't given up my art, Madame, I'm still painting. I even draw during parliamentary sessions. But I have to say, if I'd drawn you know rather than answer your questions, your visit would have been more fruitful.

He got up and announced that the interview was over. His advisers and office staff, who'd watched the interview standing at the side of the room, looked uncertain as to how they should react. Press officer Ismael Lani pulled a face, while the poet Fate Vasa applauded silently and gave the prime minister a sign that the latter answered with a nod: Yes, we'll have a chat in a minute!

Would you please wait ten minutes while your colleagues pack away their things? I'll be right back, the prime minister said to Madame Delacroix. Please, Madame, there's something I'd like to give you to take home, I'll be right back.

Fifteen minutes later he returned in an elegant, dark-blue Versace suit, light-blue shirt, Oxford alumni tie (he'd bought it years ago at Old Spitalfields Market in London, for a pound – a bargain!) and a cloud of Jean Patou D'Artagnan, an expensive aftershave with pronounced musk notes, which he regularly had sent from Paris. To round it all off, handcrafted shoes from Budapest, of course.

Please take a seat, he said, and Madame Delacroix, at a total loss, sat opposite him as if on remote control.

I'd be very happy to repeat the interview now, the prime minister said, and I'll give you honest answers.

But the cameras have been packed away, and the sound – she looked around; the crew were ready to leave with their bags.

Oh, that's a real shame! Look, what you broadcast is twaddle, empty phrases, and when it comes to the truth the first thing you say is: The furniture's not right, the optics, we've got to change everything. Then you say: We've packed everything away. But, whatever – your president is a far-sighted man, he'll understand the footage you bring him. And now he'll wonder if it really was such a smart decision to force Albania to align itself with China rather than Brussels. Think about our copper mines. Europe's largest copper deposits are in Albania.

Colette Delacroix indicated to her crew to unpack the cameras again; she waved her hands around: Quick, quick!

Do you know what's funny, Madame? We give the Chinese the mining rights, but the EU pays for the necessary infrastructure because we're still a candidate country and so we get the corresponding subsidies.

Fais vite! Vite! she urged the cameraman and sound technician with hectic hand movements.

Your president is a man with vision! He must surely understand why we're selling Tirana International Airport to China, but before we do we're getting the EU to pay for a second terminal, which is good for the price and thus our budget.

Fais vite!

Now I'll tell you something quite simple on a practical political level, something your far-sighted president will, of course, understand: Albania will join the EU. Either Albania will come into the EU or the Albanians will come. As care workers, as illegal workers, as – let me put it delicately – as families with certain interests. Either way.

We're ready, Madame! Sound? Sound on!

Now the prime minister got to his feet. Thanks for the stimulating conversation, he said, offering her his hand, which she took making a face as if this hand were infested with a virus.

What at first looked like an anarchistic rampage, was basically a masterpiece of political symbolism. The prime minister understood that developments, turnarounds, new momentum could be triggered by a simple, but highly symbolic act. The French president would get the message. And ZK knew too how much he had Fate Vasa to thank for this. He liked surrounding himself with artists, and deliberately put them in political office, but even so Fate was a special

case. He was the only one who besides his literary talent brought political experience he'd had since his younger days. And this, talent and experience, combined in Fate into an unerring sense of politically effective symbols, metaphors, lyrical imagery and seductive rhetoric. He was the one who told Edi when he was still Mayor of Tirana: You've got four years to turn grey Tirana into a colourful city. It's going to be a long process, but you can get the semblance of it done – no, let's call it the coat of paint – in a few months.

How?

You're a painter, aren't you? The most obvious thing to do is hand out pots of paint and say: Give your houses a colourful lick of paint! The city can buy the paint from Frice Llaçet here in Tirana, the company's on the verge of bankruptcy. You'll save the firm, you'll save jobs, the whole thing probably won't cost more than 900,000 lek, and some of that will come back into the coffers through corporation tax and VAT. You're a painter – tell the people to paint and watch the city turn colourful!

The plan worked. Then came his re-election. And finally the step up from Mayor of Tirana to Prime Minister of Albania after he, the independent artist, had – to put it nicely – captured the Social Democratic Party when he realised it was prepared to stoop to an electoral pact for him. He had Fate to thank for this too, this understanding of when a moment becomes so-called momentum. The momentum was when the Social Democrats realised that either they would come to power with him or end up in prison without him. Power or prison – in essence Albanian politics was never about anything else. The old party cadre needed Edi, even though they secretly loathed him. Even from his strange gestures, most unstatesmanlike, you could see that his huge man had once been a basketball player, but without a ball his hands looked slightly crazy, like Charlie Chaplin without the globe.

In the strategy meeting that morning Fate had made the comment which had amused everyone in the room to begin with, as if it were a joke. But then…

The prime minister realised at once that again it was Fate who had the right intuition…

I told you that you have to symbolically raise Skanderbeg's sword, Fate said. You laughed, the lot of you, he said, waggling his small, delicate fingers at the advisers present. But wait! Wait! It's funny, yes, but as a symbolic act too martial of course. And as a joke too paltry because it's ineffective. We're well aware of our limitations, not to say impotence, and every European leader knows this when it comes to Albania trying to flex her muscles. Annexing Kosovo, chunks of North Macedonia, to conquer and unite the entire territory of the Albanians – I ask you! Surely nobody can take that seriously. And what nobody takes seriously doesn't work as

a political message either. But… wait! Please wait! Nonetheless this idea isn't completely wrong. I've been turning it over in my mind. It's not about the sword, it's about Skanderbeg's helmet. The helmet, dear friends, is the weapon!

And he turned to the boss and said: You have to put Skanderbeg's helmet on your head!

Laughter.

Now the joke's getting surreal, Ismael Lani called out. With a flick of his hand the prime minister silenced the room.

Yes, go on and laugh, Fate said. Every Albanian knows that even if the lion only has one tooth he can still tear his victim to pieces. Zoti Kryeministër, you just have to make it clear that even from a position of apparent weakness, you are the lion. First you will take the wind out of the opposition's sails, as they've put Skanderbeg on their banners. The man who united Albania. But if you crown yourself with his helmet, then it's you standing for the unity of the Albanians, for you will have dragged the nationalists over to your side. You don't need the sword for that, the helmet will do the job. Second, it would be the best riposte to Brussels. You'll remind them that Skanderbeg was the protector of European Christianity against the Ottomans. In the tradition of Skanderbeg you'll give the Albanians more weight, more significance for Europe than you ever could if you simply went begging to Brussels for more money. This is what the helmet represents. Don't forget, the Europeans are interested in either markets or symbols, and they're desperately interested in symbols because they don't have any anymore; they call it narrative. As a market, Albania is insignificant, but as a symbol we have a very thick skull with Skanderbeg's helmet! And third, crowned with Skanderbeg's helmet, you'll show you've got a plan B, an alternative if the EU keeps us begging outside their door: Greater Albania! It's what Skanderbeg stands for too. And let's not forget his skill of forging new alliances, which brings us back to China. The best thing about it all is it won't cost us a penny. And it's more credible with the helmet than the sword. I mean, it just has to be there in the room as an idea, creating unease in certain minds.

The helmet is in a museum in Vienna, the prime minister said.

Yes, Fate replied. Your reaction in parliament yesterday was completely wrong. But tomorrow's announcement is what's key, not yesterday's mistake. Now you just have to let people know that you're going to be demanding the helmet's return.

The helmet had been sent to Tirana on loan by the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna for the "Hundred Years of the Albanian State" exhibition. Much to the EU's chagrin, the opposition seized the moment to stir up a wave of nationalism, criticising in parliament the fact that the helmet, which was of such eminent importance for Albania's identity, had been

returned to Vienna. At which the prime minister retorted to the leader of the opposition: People who need helmets are soft in the head!

OK, that was a mistake. But it's still negligible, Fate said. You tell them that the helmet was given back because there was a loan agreement. The return of the artifact proves that Albania sticks to its treaties. In Europe compliance is absolutely critical. But now you make a restitution claim. This time you're not after a loan, you want stolen national property back.

Fate opened his scuffed and cracked leather bag and took out a folder. Here, he said, some of my new poems. I hope you'll recognise yourself in the lion with one tooth.

The prime minister looked at him, this thin man with a beer belly, which looked like the bloated stomach of a starving man, his face a confusing contrast between the thin, almost glassy skin on his forehead with its blue veins shimmering through, and his chubby, stubbled cheeks. His small slender hands were confusing too, a child's hands – visually this man was not exactly the representative of classical harmony and beauty. And the prime minister, the giant, felt like taking this curious dwarf in his cupped hand and protecting him like a chick fallen from a nest.

He took the folder and said thank you.

Then Fate said something else that really preoccupied the prime minister and would lead to the most brutal feud between Albanian families since the death of the dictator Enver Hoxha in 1985:

Maybe you should have a copy of the helmet made, Fate said. Made to measure. The original one would be far too small for you. You submit the claim for restitution, allow the process to get submerged in red tape, and a while later you crown yourself with the copy that fits you perfectly, you and only you.

Seriously?

Let's think about it. In my opinion, Flag and Independence Day would be ideal for your coronation – that would be two weeks before the Balkan conference in Poznań.