

Damnation

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Purgatory

The Arab's burning better than the woman. Must be down to the kaftan, Strittmatter thought. The flames were licking at his legs. He was desperately looking for somewhere to land in these inhospitable mountains. Anywhere. The main engine cut out for a second. The helicopter dropped.

The fire hadn't yet reached the family photo beside the logbook.

This hadn't been an unusual job. His small but classy 'VIP Helicopter Transportation Corporation' often flew rich clients to spectacular sites in the Alps. In such magnificent surroundings, they were easier to schmooze. Ice and snow were particularly special for Arabs from the desert.

Shortly after a summer shower, the Arab and the woman in her elegant trouser suit had climbed into the back of Strittmatter's Bell 206. The young woman smiled professionally as she handed over confirmation for the flight from Zürich to the Gemsstock mountain. There was a twinkle in her eye. She had brought the customary welcome gift, decorated with a fat bow in the colours of the private bank - a gigantic box of chocolates.

Twenty minutes after take off the woman was on her mobile.

'Fire!' the sheikh screamed.

'Where's the extinguisher?' the woman asked with urgency, but calmly.

'Under the middle seat,' Strittmatter answered much less calmly.

She pulled out the bright-red extinguisher, broke the safety seal and tried to spray foam onto the fire.

Strittmatter cast a brief glance over his shoulder. The helicopter was made of lightweight aluminium and the seats out of flame-retardant material. But the kaftan wasn't fireproof. The Arab was ablaze, a wreath of fire in his hair.

Screaming, the Arab moulded himself into the corner. Apart from 'Allah!' Strittmatter couldn't understand a word. Earlier the Arab had spoken English. But mortal fear was suffered in the mother tongue. He hammered his fist in vain against the shatterproof window. All that broke was the glass of his expensive, mechanical wristwatch.

The fire extinguisher was empty and the woman's frantic efforts were to no avail. Terrified, she shouted, 'Land! Now! We've got to get out of here!' From the corner of his eye Strittmatter saw her trying to put out the raging flames on her white blouse with her bare hands.

They were spinning ever further downwards. In the steep mountains there were only bare rock faces, scree and ravines.

Steady the chopper. Slowly. Where the hell could they land?

The helicopter dropped once again and juddered, hurling its passengers across the cabin. He wouldn't be able to keep control for much longer, Strittmatter knew. His brow was slick with sweat and he let out a hacking cough. Black phlegm came up as the synthetic material of his shirt burned into his skin. The family photo went up in flames, first the edges, then his children, finally his wife.

They were still a hundred metres above ground when the engine cut out altogether.

A peaceful alp stretched out before the pilot. A squat hut, its two small, dimly lit windows staring back at him. Strittmatter saw black blobs on the pasture. Cows! They were lying languidly in the grass.

When the helicopter exploded at 20.44, the docile creatures leaped up awkwardly and bellowed in shock.

July 24 - 20:40

Winter lay motionless in the filthy water. A thin film of grease covered the surface, trapping a mosquito that twitched as it struggled to avoid drowning. It was a hopeless fight against death.

The water had entered Winter's ears and made its way along the auditory canals to his eardrums. His eyes were closed, head and neck submerged. His Adam's apple and injured hand rose from the surface of the lukewarm water.

His hand was scratched, dirt engrained beneath the fingernails. A mixture of earth, clay and organic residue. One of the fingernails was split.

His pulse was weak.

And very slow.

The mosquito had stopped moving.

After a day of hard, physical labour he was relaxing in his bath, easing an aching back. He wanted to be on top form for Anne this evening.

He wallowed in the memories of their first date. How the scent of her Issey Miyake perfume had tickled his nostrils as they greeted each other with the traditional three kisses. How she had stood on the old, wooden balcony with her radiant smile and a glass of sparkling white wine.

He'd ventured an apologetic gesture as he showed her the half-finished terrace in his rampant garden, where the only edible things growing were wild courgettes, cucumbers and some berries. He could recall precisely the energy that had flowed through his body when, with a gentle laugh, she placed her hand on his forearm. She'd found his jungle 'romantic' and said how much she was looking forward to fresh raspberries and blackberries.

After that they'd taken it in turns to blow on the stone barbecue to get the fire going. She'd teased him and he'd almost passed out for lack of oxygen. When they'd finally put the steaks on the embers Anne was covered in soot. A black line from the edge of the grill ran across her T-shirt beneath her chest. His dishcloth had only made the mark worse. Since that moment Winter had been unable to forget Anne's belly button.

A warm feeling washed over him as he replayed that wonderful evening in his mind. Thoughts like that drifting through his head were a positive sign. His physical exertions on the terrace and the relaxing bath were doing him good.

After dinner he and Anne had sat there for a long while, finishing the bottle of Rioja. It gradually got dark and Winter lit the candles in the lanterns. The crickets were chirping. Later he made coffee and served the cheesecake he'd bought from his favourite bakery.

Anne had told Winter about her dream of watching lizards on the Galapagos Islands. Winter had raved about the nature reserves in Canada with their huge, unspoiled forests. They'd continued laughing late into the night, touching on every topic imaginable.

Apart from the bank. At some point he and his deputy had reached a tacit agreement that they wouldn't discuss work at his house. The superior and his subordinate. It was a fine line. A business lunch at the pizzeria was acceptable. As was a formal dinner with clients. But an intimate tête-a-tête was borderline. After much hesitation, finally feelings had trumped reason.

Winter slowly raised his head and surfaced from the water. With his right hand he carefully reached for the beer beside the bath. The cold bottle relieved the burning of his pierced blisters. He wondered how his battered hands would affect his shooting accuracy. Fortunately, there were few armed bank raids these days. Robberies now took place in back

rooms. Instead of masks, the criminals wore pinstripes. Instead of dynamiting safes they hacked computers.

Winter downed his beer in one, climbed out of the bath and prepared to shave. Before applying the razor to his stubble, he examined his face in the mirror. He wasn't bothered by the lines that had started to appear. This evening, perhaps, Anne wouldn't just give him a long goodbye kiss, she would stay the night.

He'd met her at a judo competition. Winter was knocked out in the quarter-finals; Anne had won in her category. Sweating, he'd congratulated her on the victory and invited her out to dinner. She had declined, but when she saw from his business card that he worked at a private bank, she'd asked, 'Does your company recruit lawyers too?'

'Of course. Nobody else understands the contracts, though I'm not sure which came first: lawyers or contracts.'

She'd laughed, cocked her head slightly to one side and said nothing, which told him that she was not only a top judo fighter but also a sound negotiator.

'Send me your details and I'll ask our head of legal.'

Two weeks later there was no legal job for Anne, but there was lunch in a brasserie. That was the first time he saw her in one of her elegant trouser suits. Like him, Anne had studied law. After university she'd worked in a law firm whose name was so long that Winter was unable to remember it. But from her CV Winter learned that Anne had been with the police before university, working for two years as an officer on the beat while doing her matriculation certificate. And that's how she came to be his right-hand. Even though they'd only known each other for six months, they trusted each other implicitly.

Now he stepped out onto the balcony in bare feet, a towel wrapped around his waist, it was still pleasantly warm. The sun was hovering over the horizon. The weathered wood had retained the heat of the day. In the distance the mountains were clearly visible. A good sign for tomorrow's weather.

Winter went down the creaking, outdoor steps and fetched a bottle of Rioja from the cool stone cellar.

On the way back he stopped beside his temporary granite store. Beneath the stairs were three towers of heavy slabs. His intention had been to impress Anne this evening with a finished terrace. He'd taken the day off and heaped up the earth behind the new drystone wall. But he'd underestimated the work it would involve.

He calculated what he had left to do. Laying the remaining granite slabs would take another day, after which he'd be able to lie in the sun on his deck chair and enjoy the view of

the Alps. If his luck held out, it would soon be the two of them sitting here together. After all, Anne had certainly taken a shine to his little farmhouse.

The old wooden house in Eichenhubel, a secluded hamlet near Bern, had been a good buy. At first it was a shambolic building site. Now the water, heating and electricity were all functioning.

Winter was going to do the rest of the renovations gradually, when he had time. Working with his hands made for a good balance. You could immediately see the results of your labours. Maybe Anne would help him paint the shutters. At least the initial chaos had been tamed, Winter felt.

Being able to get your bearings straight away and act decisively amidst chaos was crucial in the security business too. Anybody who couldn't imagine the worst possible scenario wasn't paranoid enough to work in this field.

Lost in thought, he stroked the rough edges of the granite. They cut into his fingers. For a moment, those dead eyes from his past appeared again.

'Not today!' Winter thought.

Shaking his head, he climbed back up the outdoor stairs.

In the meantime Tiger had stretched out on the old wooden bench. The tomcat purred his contentment when Winter ruffled his neck. What could be better than a cat's life? To sleep as much as your heart desired, to be answerable to no one and to be presented with full bowl of food every day. You only had to hunt the occasional mouse.

Winter went into the kitchen and put the bottle of wine on the shelf. He glanced at his mobile. A missed call. He probably hadn't heard it when he was in the bath.

From Anne.

July 24 - 20.52

The telephone conversation was received by one of the American Navstar satellites, which sent the recording, together with millions of other electronic data, to the secret computers of the National Security Agency in the Nevada Desert. There it was automatically scanned by computer software. In the endless stream of bits and bytes the digital eavesdroppers detected a word that was on the list of defined key terms, marked the spot, took out the ninety seconds before and afterwards and sent the recording to NSA analysts. The net tightened a little.

Anne's message on Winter's voicemail was from 20:41. Most likely a status report. Or to say that Al-Bader's private Gulfstream was late again.

'Hi, Tom. It's me. Everything's fine. We're on our way with a twenty-minute delay, but the sunset is fantastic, unbelievable.'

The noise of rotor blades in the background.

'I'll call again when I'm back at the airport...'

Someone shouted, 'Fire!'

'Al-Bader's on fire!'

Winter froze. A shiver ran down his spine. As if a lightning bolt had struck the back of his neck and discharged itself down his vertebrae into the stone floor.

Muhammed Al-Bader was one of the bank's best clients, a relation of the Saudi king. A global investor with holdings around the world. A liberal businessman. A target for fundamentalist groups. Al-Bader would occasionally meet his business partners in the Swiss Alps. This was the first time Anne had accompanied him.

Winter pressed the phone to his ear and strained to make out the message.

First it sounded as if Anne was putting her phone down somewhere. Clunk.

Then he heard her voice, tinged with a hint of fear that only someone who knew her well could discern: 'Where's the fire extinguisher?'

Something that sounded like 'middle seat'. Probably the pilot.

After a 'Ffffssssshhhh' sound that seemed to go on forever, Anne was suddenly cut off. Nothing but silence. Even the chirping crickets in his garden had stopped.

Winter sat down and stared at the large kitchen table. Without noticing the bottle stains and bleached patches on the massive piece of oak.

In his mind he pictured Anne fighting the flames inside the cramped helicopter. The sunset as backdrop. Helicopters are vulnerable, fragile, especially in the mountains and at night. But Strittmatter had always been reliable. Had he been flying or had he taken the day off and sent another of his pilots?

Winter listened to the digital recording again. And again. 20:41, twenty-minute delay, everything fine, sunset, Al-Bader on fire, fire extinguisher, hissing, end.

Winter rang Anne's number: no reply.

Next he tried Strittmatter's personal mobile. After three rings it went to voicemail.

There was no answer on the VIP Helicopter Transportation Corporation business number either. Another answerphone. This time a friendly female voice told him that calls

were taken during the office hours of <date>8:00A.M. to noon, and 1:00P.M. to 5:00P.M. The same message in English. Winter hung up. As if planes and helicopters only crashed during office hours.

The kitchen clock with its extra-large numbers for sleepy eyes showed 21:02. ‘No news is good news,’ Winter thought. It was a maxim he’d always lived by: communication was only necessary when the situation changed.

Three dead ends later, the last resort was Ben, a friend from his days at police college and now head of security at Zürich airport. Fortunately he was on duty. Ben was paranoid too, a professional illness, which was why he was always on duty. He promised to call back in ten minutes; it gave Winter time to get dressed and make coffee.

After eight minutes the phone rang. Ben, with good and bad news. The good news was that they’d managed to locate the helicopter. It was stationary. Winter made a note of the coordinates. The bad news was that Skyguide air traffic control hadn’t been able to establish communication. ‘The pilot may have just popped outside,’ Ben added. ‘If there’s still no sign of life after a while they’ll send a rescue chopper. But at the moment there doesn’t seem to be one in the vicinity, I’m afraid.’

‘Christ. I get an emergency call and no one’s doing a thing.’

‘I know,’ Ben said. ‘They’re all sitting here in the control room on their ergonomically tested chairs, thinking: maybe it’ll all sort itself out, and if there’s no sign of life then it’s too late anyway and there’s no need to hurry. I’m sorry.’

Winter thanked him and hung up. He looked for a detailed map of the region. The coordinates were in a rocky area. Here the map was grey, with black, curly lines close together marking cliffs and steep terrain. The place was known as the Höllentobel, ‘Hell’s Ravine’. Purgatory.

But how accurate were the coordinates?

Luckily there was directory enquiries. He had himself connected to the priest in Kargmatt, the nearest settlement. Presbyteries were usually well-positioned with a good view.

The call was taken by a woman with a strong local dialect. Winter didn’t understand her name, but he got the impression that it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary for the elderly woman to take calls at this late hour. As the area was in the country’s Catholic heartland he assumed he was speaking to the housekeeper.

‘Good evening, my name is Winter. I’m awfully sorry to disturb you, but I really need your help.’

‘The house of God is always open, Herr Winter.’

‘Thank you. A colleague of mine is on her way to the Gemsstock mountain, near your village.’ Anne was more than a colleague, but he had never admitted that to anyone. ‘She’s in a helicopter and called me earlier to say that it was on fire.’

‘Good heavens!’

‘Have you seen anything?’ Kargmatt was a kilometre or two from the Höllentobel. As an optimist, he didn’t want to use the words ‘helicopter crash’. Not yet.

‘My dear man, the ways of the Lord are inscrutable, but I’ll happily help you if I can.’ Winter began to doubt that the kindly housekeeper would be able to help him.

‘Can you see the helicopter?’

‘The helicopter?’

‘Yes,’ Winter replied, trying to keep a lid on his simmering anger.

‘Wait a second. I need to take a peek out of the window.’

Clunk. The telephone was put down on a hard surface. The same sound that Anne’s phone had made.

An age later: ‘Are you still there? I can’t see any helicopter.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘It is rather dark, sir.’

‘Have you seen a light?’

‘The light of the Lord shines...’

‘Or a fire?’

‘Yes, down in the Höllentobel. Jakob sometimes burns cleared branches down there.’

Winter stared into the distance. A pause. Then the housekeeper finally twigged.

‘Oh my God! You mean the helicopter crashed down there?’

Ignoring her question Winter delved further: ‘What’s Jakob’s full name?’

‘Jakob Zbinden.’

‘Does he have a telephone?’

‘I believe he does have a mobile phone.’

‘Do you have the number?’

‘In the card index we have the numbers and addresses of our entire flock.’ After what seemed like an eternal search, the housekeeper found Jakob Zbinden’s mobile number in the presbytery’s card index. The time was 21:17. The cowherd, who had to milk early in the morning, was probably in bed already. But Winter needed to be certain. Jakob answered after the second ring. A bad sign.

‘Jakob.’ Cool, terse, youthful and pronounced in an American way. Not exactly the country bumpkin under the protective wing of the Church that Winter had imagined.

‘My name’s Winter, I’m calling from Bern. I got your number from the presbytery. Please excuse me for phoning so late, but I’ve got an urgent question.’

‘Are you a journalist?’ Jakob asked aggressively. ‘Hot on the heels of a story?’

‘No, I’m not a journalist. One of my colleagues was on a helicopter in your area.’

‘I’m sorry.’ All of a sudden the cowherd’s tone was restrained.

‘What happened?’

‘The helicopter crashed in the Höllentobel.’

Purgatory.

July 24 - 21:22

On the drive to the Höllentobel Winter tried to comprehend the tornado twisting inside him. He sought to observe the storm of his emotions from a safe distance, as if from a weather plane flying above a whirlwind. He saw the anger churning him up and hurling images through his mind. Anger at the helicopter that for some reason had crashed. An indeterminate anger at the people who were guilty. The pilot? A careless maintenance mechanic? A religious fundamentalist?

And beneath all this, anger at himself. For, in truth, it ought to have been him in that helicopter.

The anger mingled with the pain this had stirred.

Anne was his deputy, his right hand, but she’d become more than that in his head. They got on so well together. Earlier, he’d been so looking forward to the evening, the night and the day afterwards. Now the Höllentobel had devoured the helicopter.

A lightning strike.

Winter shook his head.

He wanted to see Anne.

He wanted to take Anne in his arms. Protect her.

Then, all of a sudden, Winter was in the eye of the tornado. Silence. A dull ‘why?’. Winter was in the purring stillness of his silver-grey Audi. It was dark and there was little traffic. He drove quickly, over the speed limit. He couldn’t understand the stillness. Was it fear? Fear of making a mistake? Fear of failure? Just one false move and the tornado would seize hold of

him, tear the ground away from beneath his feet, suck him high in the air, and throw him off course once more. The whirlwind left a trail of devastation inside. The dead eyes stared at Winter. Glassy. He screwed up his own eyes. He didn't want to visit this place in his memory ever again.

When Winter opened his eyes he found himself racing towards the taillights of a car driving at the right speed in front of him. He slammed on the brakes. The tyres screeched and smoked and the seatbelt cut into his stomach. The electronic braking systems had just managed to prevent a collision.

Winter ran his tongue across dry lips. He consciously pictured himself placing a heavy lid on the past. From this moment he would focus only on the task in hand. He put his foot down again and overtook.

A helicopter crash involving a filthy-rich sheikh and a beautiful woman on the way to a remote mountain hut didn't fit well with the discreet image of the bank. What disturbed him were the people who'd get to the helicopter before he did. The fire brigade, police, locals, curious journalists. A tabloid was advertising with the slogan 'Earn money with a single call!' It was purely a question of time. He had to be quicker.

As usual his line manager, Känzig, failed to answer Winter's call, so he rang von Tobler, but the private bank's CEO was at a barbecue. His booming greeting suggested he'd already had a few glasses. Winter pictured the boss in shorts rather than bespoke suit and with pale calves. Within ten seconds he'd managed to ruin von Tobler's good mood.

None of the guests chomping on their steaks would have had an inkling of what was going through von Tobler's head. The boss was a master of the art of jovial conversation and of the impenetrable poker face.

The account managers loved taking their clients out to eat with the boss, potentially bumping up the fees by two or three tenths of a per cent. On fortunes running into a hundred million francs that easily matched Winter's annual salary. But business was getting ever more difficult. The Asian banking centres were on the march. Swiss banking secrecy was crumbling.

Over the past thirty years the chief had run the bank almost singlehandedly and with great success. Profits had multiplied. When he realized a few years back that the bank was too small to keep pace with global growth, he persuaded the other family members to sell a proportion of their shares in a complicated transaction.

Today almost half of the bank was owned by an anonymous financial group that consisted of a large bank, an insurance firm and two other private banks. At the time, commentators and financial analysts had been in agreement. The financial group had paid a

hefty price for the bank, the timing of the deal – just prior to the crisis – was perfect and von Tobler’s personal wealth had increased substantially.

Von Tobler was a patriarch of the old school and knew what he had in Winter. Winter had met him while still commander of the Bern police ‘Enzian’ special unit. Von Tobler’s daughter, Miriam, had been abducted. The banker was prepared to pay an enormous sum to get back the apple of his eye. And Winter had negotiated her release in return for the ransom.

Winter had handed over the ransom money personally and brought Miriam to safety from the kidnappers, before arresting them after a frenzied pursuit. As a result the overjoyed chief made him an enticing offer.

For a few years now he’d been in charge of security at the exclusive bank, which boasted clients from all across the world. Clients who expected that nothing would happen to them and their money in Switzerland.

At the bank Winter enjoyed greater freedom and less bureaucracy than with the police. He was his own boss and could manage his own time, just so long as nothing happened and nobody was inconvenienced by the security measures in place. Normally security could be taken for granted. After all, this wasn’t the Wild West. And here was the paradox: as head of security he was doing his job best when nobody noticed anything. Nobody said, ‘Thank you.’

Apart that is from von Tobler, who would give Winter the occasional clap on the shoulder in appreciation. But now the CEO didn’t say much. He merely authorized Winter to do all he could to limit the damage to the bank and get to bottom of why the helicopter crashed. Von Tobler wanted to be kept updated around the clock. He said he’d inform the board and, before hanging up, asked Winter to put the HC – head of communications – in the picture.

The telephone call with the HC, who’d declared public relations to be a top-level issue when he started his job a few months ago, lasted longer. Relations with the outside world were crucial. The perception of security was as important for maintaining trust as the actual level of security itself. Winter was pleased that it was the PR department rather than he who had to grapple with the media and their poisonous half-truths.

Helfer, the pretty boy, wanted to play for time, express the bank’s sympathy and avoid commenting on the private activities of its clients. He’d stick to a strategy of passive communication – informal, off-the-record conversations with journalists investigating the story – and insist that the sheikh’s trip had been a purely private one. The term ‘private’ was a mantra to be repeated over and over again, he added. The head of PR also told Winter that scientific studies had shown how messages with repetition turned out to be more believable.

Fortunately a tunnel cut off the call after almost a quarter of an hour.

The 'private' was where Winter's problems began, however. He didn't know much about Al-Bader. A lot of things in the bank functioned on the basis of personal relationships. Winter knew the salient features of the client relationship with Al-Bader: very high net worth individual, politically exposed person, successful businessman and investor, increased vigilance with regard to money-laundering, no known personal preferences or weaknesses. Just over a week ago all that Stefan Schütz, Al-Bader's account manager, said of the sheikh's foray into Switzerland was, 'Actually he's not here, he's at a conference in Norway.'

'Interesting. An Arab sheikh at a conference in Norway?'

'I don't know for sure what sort of conference it is. Something to do with global infrastructure investments. Given the current fluctuations on stock markets, buying a road can be a highly lucrative move.'

Noticing Winter's raised his eyebrows, Schütz explained further: 'You start with an investment. Let's say you build a motorway, for example. Later you raise the charges, claiming it's inflation, then you've got a nice little cashflow. Of course you need the loose change to begin with. But that's not a problem for Al-Bader. In fact, he's von Tobler's client.'

It was Schütz who'd asked Winter to organize the helicopter trip. 'He's planning to meet someone in Switzerland early in the morning of July 25th. He'll be arriving the evening before in Zürich on his private jet and I'd be grateful if you could arrange for a helicopter to pick him up and take him to the mountain hut on the Gemsstock.'

Routine. The bank took care of practically every aspect of Al-Bader's visits to Switzerland. He loved the mountains and had already made a number of high Alpine tours at the bank's invitation.

'Who's he meeting?'

'No idea. Some investors.' Then, rather tersely, Schütz had added, 'Not our business.'

Now, in the cocoon of his car, Winter wondered what Al-Bader had been doing in Norway and who it was he'd arranged to meet here. Friend or foe? And why in Switzerland? Did it have anything to do with the range of his jet? What was the range of Al-Bader's Gulfstream? Winter made a mental note to consult the manufacturer's web site. At the end of the day truth boiled down to physics. Metres, minutes and kilograms.

And chance.

Or destiny.

His original intention had been to pick up Al-Bader from the airport personally. But instead he'd sent Anne. He'd sent Anne on this flight because he wanted to give her the opportunity of meeting one of the bank's best clients. And it had suited him to take the time off

and work on his terrace. And now, in all probability, Anne was dead.

Winter set aside his feelings of guilt and the nagging doubts, and concentrated on the immediate future. This was what he could influence, but only if he remained focused. Why had the helicopter crashed? Experience told him that the answer to this question would either be revealed soon or not at all.

He turned off the motorway. The road became narrower and the bends tighter. The headlights tunnelled into the night. Summer storms had descended on central Switzerland that evening. Winter opened the window and breathed in the cool air that smelled of wet grass. He drove through the narrow streets of Kargmatt and caught sight of the church with its presbytery.

Afterwards the road ran steeply downhill and across an old bridge. An unmarked turn-off. The dirt track road snaked its way through the forest and up the other side of the valley. The fir forest was dark and fresh after the rain. Winter could see the sickle of the moon through the trees.

It was midnight when the forest thinned out and the ever-chirpy voice of his satnav informed him: 'You have reached your destination.'

At that moment the phone rang and Anne's name flashed up on the display.