

"The greatest victory is the one that requires no battle."

— Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

INTRODUCTION

It is 2081. The world is divided into four regions. The entire Eurasian continent has formed a single government to defend itself economically and politically against the Pan-American continent.

To combat terrorism, citizens' privacy has been eroded bit by bit over the years. So much so that citizens are expected to report any suspicious activity. If it transpires that they knew something but did nothing about it, they are regarded as co-suspects. To ensure that everything runs smoothly, the separation of powers has been set aside, and a police force has been established: the security police, also known as SePo. The heads of the regions have the power to judge and punish. The suspect may appeal to an independent judge, but that can take years. Moreover, these judges appear to be particularly corrupt.

The death penalty has been reintroduced to reduce the costs of overcrowded prisons. It is carried out on a scaffold – there is one in every square – where the suspect must kneel and is shot in the head in public. A single bullet. If the victim survives, they are considered 'lucky' and receive medical care.

To ward off economic crises, all major companies have become state-owned enterprises. First came the banks, which often had to ask for government support. Later, the companies that were in debt to these banks were nationalised. Loans were withdrawn from companies deemed unprofitable, causing them to go bankrupt and their assets to fall into the hands of the state.

Sharia law applies throughout the Middle East. Reviled and deemed extremely barbaric by Euro-Asian leaders, yet in practice more humane than the criminal justice system in Pan-Eurasia.

America has descended into the old Wild West due to the latest economic crisis, causing states such as California and Florida to go bankrupt. Those in authority were no longer being paid, causing the judicial system to collapse. Due to disease, the population there has dwindled to a few tens of millions – no one knows the exact figure – and cities such as New York, among others, are completely deserted. As a result, technological progress has also ground to a halt and even regressed.

The Euro-Asian union to defend against Pan-America was, in itself, completely illogical, but once it had got underway, it could no longer be stopped. Thus, it grew into a totalitarian state, without the citizens knowing who was actually in power.

Australia and New Zealand have cut themselves off from the rest of the world and have been forgotten by virtually everyone. Africa is still Africa, only nobody cares about them any more.

1 – HOW IT STARTED.

Autumn has truly set in now. Dark grey clouds are racing across the sky. The wind howls menacingly, but on the ground you hardly notice it. I'm walking through the town centre of Raunsend, my hands tucked deep into the pockets of my long winter coat – the only coat I own. Although it's evening, the streetlights aren't working due to a lack of maintenance.

In the few dilapidated little shops that remain, lights shine in the shop windows, displaying mostly second-hand goods. In a shop selling old televisions, I see the same images on every screen. I've seen them earlier today. It's an amateur film of a flying saucer. The footage is repeated over and over, whilst the newsreader laughs at the amateurish nature of this attempt to pull everyone's leg. Her male colleague is much more serious, but his opinion remains unclear.

I think the footage looks quite realistic, but what do I know? The idea that we're being visited by extraterrestrials is implausible. The distances in the universe are far too great to bridge – though I'm not too savvy with that either.

The shopping centre is brightly lit, so much so that it hurts my eyes. Luxury cars drive to and fro with smartly dressed people. Giggling young ladies walk arm in arm with grey, boring old men. They are spoiled with fur coats or jewellery. They'll have to do something in return for that later. This is the elite: people who can afford this.

They live in a part of the city enclosed by a high fence. You can't get in there without an escort, or unless you live there. The gatekeeper has a licence to shoot you, without having to answer for it.

I don't look at the shopping centre. The last thing I want is to catch the eye of a police officer on guard there. Before you know it, you'll be arrested as a suspected terrorist. And you'll remain one until you can prove your innocence beyond a shadow of a doubt. Yet, that isn't the main reason I don't want to look a policeman in the eye. Above all, I don't want him to see the hatred in my eyes – the ever-intensifying hatred I've harboured towards them for the past six months.

I hunch my shoulders slightly and quicken my pace. I leave the high street and the city centre behind me. Sirens can be heard in the distance. It's happening again. I feel the hatred flaring up inside me. The sirens are drawing closer fast, and it isn't long before three SePo armoured vehicles race past me. They stop at the end of the street and a small army of police officers jumps out.

I hide in the darkness of a doorway and instinctively reach for the grip of my Glock. They're not going to capture me alive. Then it turns out they're not after me. They run towards a house on the right-hand side of the road and in one swift movement the door is smashed in with a thick steel pipe. An army of officers storms inside.

I hear a woman scream, followed by the sound of shattering glass and falling objects. Suddenly, a window shatters. I can't see what's happening. After a few minutes, filled with wailing, shouting and the sound of chaos, two women are dragged out. My memories flood back. My finger slides towards the trigger; I pull the gun from my pocket and aim at the scene.

Then I realise that on my own, I'm no match for the police force. In no time at all, I'd be riddled with bullets, whilst I'd be able to take down two at most. I disappear back into the shadows and put my gun away. The women – probably a mother and daughter – are thrown into the rear armoured vehicle. They wail in mortal fear.

Some SePo stay behind; the rest get into the vehicles and drive off again, still with their sirens blaring. I don't want to walk past the house and take a side street to get away from here. The hatred is so intense that I can almost literally feel it eating away at me. I try to calm my thoughts, but I can't.

Six months ago, I saw my friend's wife being taken away in the same way, along with the girl next door who happened to be with us too. I was arrested as well, but for some reason they released me after a few weeks – supposedly because my involvement hadn't been proven. Involvement in what? Heaven only knows.

By then, I had lost my job, as the law dictates. I was told nothing else. To this day, nothing has been heard of the fate of the woman or the girl next door. I have sworn to myself that I will find them, but to this day, I have been unable to think of a way. I have even considered getting myself arrested, but another friend advised against it. After all, men and women are imprisoned separately.

When I get home, it's just starting to rain a little. My coat isn't waterproof and soaks up water easily, so I'm glad to be inside before it really starts pouring. I'm also glad I'm a technician – at least my TV works. I grab a film from the cupboard and put it on. Films haven't been made for a very long time, and this one is from the last century.

It's about a man who has eternal life and stays young. He is deeply in love with a woman, but watches her grow old and die. He is torn apart by grief – at least when he isn't fighting with others who also have eternal life. Apparently, that privilege is granted only to men. I'm glad I don't have eternal life. I've seen the film many times, but it still captivates me.

2 - THE EXECUTION.

When the film ends, I switch off the TV. The lead actor has won the prize: he is now mortal and happy about it. It sounds ridiculous, but I understand it completely. I get up and walk to my study. I make a living from repairs I do for people. Not everyone pays me, but that doesn't bother me much. Many people still have some money, and I can live off that. Due to the huge number of vacant properties, house prices have plummeted to almost nothing over the last ten years. I'm delighted with that.

Due to a lack of technical expertise, the SePo has reverted to old-fashioned analogue communication systems; they're easier to maintain. Not that it was mentioned, but I could tell from the antennas on the cars. Ever since I've known that, I've been trying to build a receiver so I can hear what they're communicating. So far, I haven't succeeded, but yesterday I happened to get an ancient scanner from a friend of a friend. It used to be able to pick up all the signals, until the emergency services switched to digital, encrypted communication. It's ancient – I reckon nearly a hundred years – and has been in that man's family all that time. Of course, it didn't work, but with the help of old books saved from the Great Book Burning, I'm hopeful I can repair it. I just don't yet understand all the symbols on the diagrams that were inside the device.

I put on my reading glasses – which I use as a magnifying glass – and examine the circuit board up close. Furthermore, I check all the wiring etched onto it, until I suddenly spot a loose component. It hasn't been soldered properly and over the years, it has come loose. Hey, that's odd. How did I not notice that before? I heat my soldering iron and solder it back in place with a single touch. Not for too long, as I'm afraid of burning through the component. I check the new solder joint and am satisfied. It looks as good as new again. I continue checking the circuit board, but find no further irregularities. Could it be?

A nervous tension creeps over me as I pick up the power supply and plug it in. I switch it on – and lo and behold: it starts up. I turn the frequency knob and hear all sorts of static, but no voices. Hmm, so it's not quite right yet. My enthusiasm begins to wane until I realise there's no antenna in it. I look at the plug. I can't remember ever seeing anything that fits into this. The plugs on my radio and TV look entirely different. I rummage through my collection of bits and bobs again. I have plenty of connectors, but not a single one fits.

Furthermore, I decide to go to bed. I'm tired and the emotions of this day have worn me out. It doesn't take long before I slip into a dreamless sleep.

After breakfast, I decide to head into town to see if I can find an aerial – or something

that will do. The weather has improved a bit; clouds are still scudding across the sky, but it's dry and now and then a watery sun breaks through. Luckily, it's quite a walk to the part of town I want to go to, and I'd rather not get wet. I open my door and just catch sight of a couple of rats seeking shelter. Two policemen with just as many dogs are walking down my street, but they pay me no mind. I avoid looking their way and walk quickly in the opposite direction.

Long, dull, grey streets pass me by. I don't look at them and I don't think about them. It's the place where I've lived my whole life; the bleakness doesn't really strike me. Occasionally, I'm more lucid, and then I do see that same bleakness and feel the need to do something about it. The people who live there are just as grey and drab and just as indifferent. I don't want to be indifferent, but I don't have the strength.

I want to cross a square, but it's unexpectedly busy. There's an execution and the people are jeering at the suspects. Not because they want to, but because they're obliged to. It's not written or spoken, but everyone knows: anyone who doesn't join in will be arrested and suffer the same fate. I want to walk past, but I'm stopped by a policeman with an automatic weapon. Meekly, I do as he demands and head towards the scaffold. I'm startled when I recognise the woman from yesterday. Her clothes are covered in blood, and she's crying softly. That's quickly settled... Anger grips me when the shot rings out and the woman collapses. I try to find some sort of relief in the fact that her suffering is over, but I can't.

I take in the face of the man standing on the scaffold with his hands behind his back. The peak of his cap is pulled well down over his eyes. Yet, thanks to the reflection of the sun that has just come out, some light falls on his face. He stands emotionless. You can see the self-righteousness dripping from him. I look at the people in the square; some are cheering, seemingly with genuine enthusiasm. I could kill them without a second thought. Others are standing there crying. Two girls have laid their heads on each other's shoulders. Their clothes are wet.

Suddenly, a tall man catches my eye. He is really very tall – over seven feet. His face is as white as paper, and he is thin, literally skin and bones. His long white hair blows in all directions, something that absolutely does not suit his long grey raincoat. He is studying everyone. His face moves slowly from side to side, as if he is reading the crowd. Suddenly, he turns halfway round and looks straight at me. A shiver of fear runs down my spine. He doesn't have ordinary eyes; his eyes are completely black. His eyebrows are light in colour, slightly darker than his skin. His eyes are set deep in his skull, and he has a high forehead. Also, his mouth is a thin line with the corners turned downwards. His chin and jaw, framed by long white hair, stand out sharply against his taut skin.

Although the eye contact seems to last a long time, in reality it only lasted a few seconds. Abruptly, he turns and walks away. I try to follow him, but the tightly packed crowd prevents me. I give up and carry on my way. No one seems to notice this

striking figure.

The officer who stopped me has gone, and I can carry on undisturbed. You get somewhat used to such executions, but it never leaves me unmoved. Those so-called terrorists could be anyone – from young boys to old women and everything in between. It works: fear is well and truly ingrained; civil disobedience is a thing of the past.

Although... there's a rumour going round that a resistance movement is organising itself. There are other rumours, but this one is persistent. I've no idea. It doesn't leave me indifferent, but I think it's pointless. Before you know it, you've been betrayed by your neighbour, colleague, or a member of your family. If someone doesn't like you, they simply make a false report. They then receive a compliment from the local commander, and you're safely locked up. Not a soul bats an eyelid. That's why I keep a low profile and don't get involved in anything. Every so often I fix something for someone, and then I've made another friend. For as long as that lasts...

The cloud cover breaks and the square loses its gloom; the sun floods it. Most people aren't cheered by the spectacle on the scaffold. Very faintly, I hear a strange rumbling sound in the distance. At first, no one reacts to it, but it's getting closer fast. People stop and look up. It seems to be coming from above. It sounds like a thunderstorm, but it isn't – the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The noise becomes deafening as a large, dark shape appears above the houses.

“A UFO, a UFO!” people in the crowd shout. UFO, my arse – this is a Harrier at least seventy years old. How on earth did they get it working again? And who can even fly a thing like that? The books I saved are now proving their worth. People are scattering in panic in all directions. Only I, a couple of officers and that tall, pale skeleton remain standing. I decide not to join in and walk at a brisk pace into an alley, in case I get arrested and have to explain why I stayed put.

The flying object fires what I suspect is a rocket straight at the scaffold. An explosion follows and all the officers involved in the execution are killed instantly. Well, that'll teach them... I stand up again from my crouched position, low to the ground, and look around. There are broken windows in the area, but they were already broken before the attack. I see the pale man running away quickly. It seems sensible not to get involved in this, so I hurry off too. I don't pay attention to where I'm going, but by chance I'm heading in the right direction and spot the shop selling radio parts. Almost relieved, I step inside, but not before carefully checking to see if I'm being followed. Not that I'm afraid of that – they'll be too busy now – but you never know.

The man in the shop seems surprised by a customer. Wringing his hands and hunched over in an old smock, he comes towards me. His eyebrows are raised, as if he wants to ask a question. I decide to pretend he's already asked it and describe the plug I need. Sure enough, he has one – one that's been soldered on a few times, but still good

enough.

“Why are you looking for a plug like that?” he asks.

“The one on my TV has broken off”, I lie, as if it were set in stone.

“These are usually used with radio transmitters and receivers.” He pretends not to be entirely sure, but I can sense he’s seen through my lie. I shrug, take the thing with me, and head back home. To avoid any trouble, I take a detour. The last thing I want is to walk across that square again. The sun is shining now, and some people don’t seem as gloomy as usual. I even see some of them smiling as they walk through the streets in pairs.

3 – THE RECEIVER.

The final antenna consists of nothing more than a copper wire running up the side of the house to the skylight. I've no idea how long it needs to be, but I suspect it doesn't matter all that much for a receiver. We'll see. Soldering the plug wasn't too difficult – it was attached in no time.

I turn the frequency knob again and my heart skips a beat when I hear all sorts of sounds. No voices, just whistling tones with rapidly changing frequencies. I have no idea what that means. Furthermore, I plug a pair of headphones into the device and slowly scan through all the frequencies, turning the dial, until I suddenly hear voices. I jump, throw the headphones off my head and stare at the device, panting. Then I pull myself together, put them back on and listen again.

They are indeed voices, but what language are they speaking? It sounds like Russian. My heart is racing. I write down the frequency and cautiously continue searching.

Furthermore, I hear the strangest sounds: creaking, squeaking, whistling – even something that sounds like a dog whining. I don't know if these are natural sounds, or if people are actually communicating.

I fiddle with the buttons, the purpose of which I don't understand, and scan the frequencies a few times. Then I hear the SePo's walkie-talkies. These voices are clearly intelligible. Hey, that's great. I note down the frequencies and the settings of the various buttons. You never know.

Suddenly, I hear loud shouting in the distance. I can't make it out, but the metallic sound gives it away: the state broadcasters are on the move again. Usually, that's a call to go to the main square because the head of state has something to say to us. There's a huge screen there on which the same face is always visible – a face that, according to reports, hasn't changed in forty years. The head of state claims to be immortal. The old technology probably lends a hand with that.

And sure enough, a car drives through the streets with a blaring loudspeaker on the roof. Over the pompous national anthem comes the announcement that we must be present in the town square tomorrow at two o'clock. Officially, it's not compulsory, but most people go anyway, just to be on the safe side. I've skipped it a few times already and decide to wait until tomorrow to decide whether I'll go. Actually, I've got nothing better to do. And the rumours about re-education camps aren't far from the truth. But I've no fancy for that pompous drivel.

As I fiddle with the knobs, I hear those Russian-sounding voices again – on a different frequency this time. I make a note of it. Then I mess about with the rest of the knobs, most of whose functions are completely unclear to me. Suddenly, the sound becomes much clearer when I turn a small knob. I keep turning until the shapeless sounds seem to form words. I still can't make them out, but the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It sounds... otherworldly. Lots of clicking and sibilant sounds. Even Arabs don't speak like that. Fascinated, I keep listening.

I have the feeling that if I listen long enough, I might be able to understand the language. It's just the intonation – so many questions, so many short, hurried sentences. And yet... it sounds organised. I hear several voices, but they all sound the same, as if a single being is speaking through different mouths.

On the receiver there is a small meter indicating signal strength. At first, it was at S2, with a lot of static. Now it shoots up to S5. The static disappears. The voices sound louder, closer. There is a difference in strength between the voices: for some, the needle swings further than for others. There must be numerous groups. Then I suddenly hear a hissing sound – a loud noise. I tap the receiver; it crackles loudly. However, the sound turns out to be coming from outside.

I recognise it immediately. It's again a Harrier, probably the same one as this afternoon. I walk outside. The sky is pitch black, the Milky Way clearly visible. Suddenly, a triangular hole appears in the starry sky. The stars behind it seem to ripple, as if reflected in water. The hole moves slowly northwards, then turns west. Then I see the glow of engines lights up. Suddenly, they turn bright yellow and the aircraft vanishes into the distance at incredible speed, followed by a dull bang that makes the houses shake. My heart is pounding in my throat.

The military technology of the Ancients... It must have been hell to live in those times. It almost makes you glad that we now live in this supposedly stable utopia.

Almost.

An explosion sounds in the distance, followed by sirens. The evening sky glows orange. I suspect a major fire. I am curious, but it doesn't seem like a good idea to go out onto the streets at night. Besides, it's too far to walk. I go back inside. My thoughts are still racing, but my hands are working automatically.

Then I remember that I can eavesdrop on the emergency services. Fortunately, I've noted down their frequencies. For no apparent reason, I feel a strange excitement. I hear shouting over the radio – panic, orders, gunshots. The signal strength meter spikes passed S9. They must be close by.

“Harry! To your left! Watch out!”

“Yes, I can see him!” Gunshots.

“Got him?”

“No, he just seemed to vanish. I can’t see him any more... ugh.” A gurgle. Then silence.

“Harry! Harry!” No reply. A third voice joins in.

“Help! It’s swarming with them here. Assistance need—” The signal cuts out with a sharp click.

“Base to all! Withdraw to Coronation street. This is an order! I repeat: withdraw to Coronation street. You will receive new orders there.”

“Help, help! I’m surrounded! Can’t get away!” A woman’s voice, breaking with fear.

“Ignore that request. Everyone to Coronation street.”

“But you can’t just leave me to die, can you?! Help me, I won’t survive this!”

“Everyone to Coronation street”, the base barks once more.

Then it goes quiet.

I carefully scan the nearby frequencies and switch back to the original band. I decide to leave the receiver on whilst I go to sleep – if anything happens, I’ll be woken up.

But just then, someone bangs on the door. My heart nearly stops. I peer through the window: Esther. She looks completely panicked. I run to the door and fling it open. Without saying a word, she pushes me aside and storms inside.

“Jan?” I ask.

“I don’t know. There was a clap of thunder nearby, and he just had to go and have a look. I couldn’t stop him.”

“Stubborn, all his life. Have you been looking for him?”

She shakes her head and turns round so I can take her coat. I make a gesture towards the room. Esther and Jan... I can’t quite figure them out. They say they aren’t in a relationship, but they’re inseparable. Yet, I’ve never caught them exchanging a glance, a gesture, or a touch. Esther appears aloof, but I know better. Behind that distance lies an insecure, gentle person, full of compassion.

She tells me there was a strange noise, followed by a massive explosion. A moment later, the sirens wailed and chaos reigned in the street. Jan went to have a look and said he’d be ‘back in a moment’. When he wasn’t, she went after him, despite her fear. She saw bodies – police officers, medical staff, civilians. And someone in the same clothes as Jan. She thought he was dead. When the emergency services withdrew, she came to me on her old bicycle.

I pour two glasses of cognac, even though she’d asked for coffee. She takes a big gulp without protest.

“Stay here tonight”, I say. “Don’t go back until it’s light.” At that moment, the receiver starts crackling – voices again. Esther drops her glass in fright, but luckily, it remains intact. I briefly explain what the device is, whilst listening with half an ear. She listens in, just as curious as I am.

Panic. Shouting. Cries for help. Orders. A woman’s voice calls for assistance, drowned out by chaos. The operator snaps:

“Will everyone please stick to protocol? Then I can keep things under control here!”

It grows quieter, but the tension remains palpable.

“What on earth could they be so afraid of?” asks Esther.

“I only have a vague idea.” I tell her about the square this afternoon – about the plane, the massacre, and that I think there’s resistance against the state.

“Arbitrarily?!” Her eyebrows shoot up. “Do you really think the government just picks people up for no reason?” I’m momentarily speechless. That naivety... and yet, I know that almost everyone thinks that way. They believe the state is infallible, that surveillance means protection.

I try to explain calmly that the state is made up of people too, and that people make mistakes. I tell her that things used to be different: that citizens chose their leaders, that the powers were separate – legislators, executives, judges. Corruption was harder back then.

“How do you know all that?” I point to a pile of old books.

“Those aren’t authorised”, she says indignantly, though she can’t possibly know that. Still, she picks one up and starts reading. A moment later she says, surprised:

“Have we landed on the moon? That’s simply not possible! Why don’t they teach this at school?” I want to say that knowledge is power – that the government is afraid the citizens will regain power – but I swallow it. The time isn’t right for it.

“Are you going to report me for those books now?” I ask cautiously. She looks at me for a long time and slowly shakes her head. Her hair glistens in the light from the table.

“No”, she says softly but firmly. “That’s going too far.” Yet, I don’t feel reassured. I don’t know where her loyalty really lies.

Suddenly, there’s a noise from the radio again.

“There’s a large container here in front of the police station. What is that? Does anyone know what’s inside?”

“Stay away from it! It could be an explosive!”

“The door’s welded shut – I’m out of here.” A brief silence. Then a dull explosion, followed by static. Five seconds later, we hear a massive boom in the distance. We look at each other and rush outside at the same time. The sky glows orange.

“What on earth is that?” she whispers. I’m sure this must be the resistance. Who else? That plane from this afternoon, in particular, keeps haunting my thoughts. If this is the resistance, then they’re well-organised – and well-equipped. I feel something new: curiosity. Perhaps even hope.

We’re just about to go back inside when we hear a humming sound. Not really a hum – something deeper, more vibrating. We look up, but there are no stars to be seen any more. The sound slowly fades away. Then, for a moment, I see something black moving in the orange glow of the fire. Big. Too big to be human.

We go inside. The radio is quiet again, apart from a bit of hissing and chatter. I’m so tired that I couldn’t care less about any of it.

4 – WAR?

After a dreamless night, I wake up feeling stiff. It seems like a good idea to have a hot shower first before doing anything else. Because I slept so deeply, I've got a headache, and I know from experience that a hot jet of water on my neck can work wonders.

I suddenly realise I'm still wearing my clothes. I undress and walk to the shower. The warm water does me good, and I stay under it for a long time. I'm never quick in the shower, as shaving my beard and head alone takes me fifteen minutes. I feel my chin – it's time again. Furthermore, I grab the shaving cream and start lathering up my head. It's a two-day tradition, and I move the razor with extreme precision. I always start at the same spot and always make the same movements. You could see it as a form of religion, with obsessive traits.

Fifteen minutes later, I step out of the shower with a shiny skull. I rub my head for a moment, pleased with how smooth it is. I stroll nonchalantly into the room – and find myself face to face with Esther. After a sheepish smile, I quickly turn around and walk back to put some clothes on.

When I return, she's in the kitchen making breakfast. She's standing slightly bent over the worktop; her right-hand moves swiftly as she spreads the butter on the slices of bread. She's made four for me. Far too few, but I let it be. She's sweet, and actually, I find her quite attractive. Of course, I don't let on and thank her for the bread. Without any fuss, we sit down at the table.

"I want to tell you something, but I'm not sure if I should." Chewing my bread, I look at her. That must look rather silly. She looks at me and giggles softly. Now I'm really curious.

"I'm definitely not going to report you." I fall silent and wait.

"I feel the same as you..." She holds her sandwich halfway to her mouth; her hand trembles slightly. "Worse still, I'm actually doing something about it."

"You're talking about our lovely utopia?" I ask.

She nods. "I'm in the resistance."

Now she has my full attention. So it really does exist. I stare at her; she seems to feel even more uncomfortable, but I can't say anything.

"Don't be afraid", I say at last. "I've long suspected there was a resistance movement active. I've saved books from the great book-burning and read about the old days, when things were very different."

Now it's her turn to look sheepish. I carry on.

"It's crystal clear to me that the state wants to keep us ignorant so it can stay in

power. That's why there are severe penalties for criticism and knowledge. It's happened before in history."

"What happened then?"

"Usually, such states were weakened from within because the people rose in revolt. You can't kill everyone. Ultimately, it's always just a small elite against the rest of the people. Often, the army would then turn against its commanders."

"What is an army?"

"The same as the SePo", I explain, "only bigger, and with better weapons."

"Do we have an army?"

"I don't know. I reckon the SePo and the army have become one force. How many weapons do they have? No idea."

To be honest, I don't think so, given that they couldn't do a thing against that Harrier yesterday. Still, I don't dare say that – I still don't know if I can fully trust Esther.

"You don't quite trust me, do you?" I shake my head. "Who's to say you're not trying to trick me right now?"

"Nobody. But do you remember how Jan was always so... er... devout about the state?" I nod. That's right.

"That's why I was so reserved towards him."

I don't quite see why that would be proof of her innocence, but I let it go. Better to keep quiet than to break the trust. Besides, I don't want to know too much about her relationship with Jan. Or rather: her former relationship. He's probably dead now.

She suddenly smiles. "I do trust you." If this is a ploy to disarm me, it's working. And to be honest: what have I got to lose? Apart from those books, I've never done anything to the state. And after yesterday, they've got other things on their minds.

"Did you dare carry on with your activities with Jan so close by?" I ask.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, getting involved with the resistance. If he'd caught you, he could have reported you." She shakes her head.

"He would never have done that." Perhaps she's right. She knows him better than I do. Still, I can't help thinking that she kept everything hidden from him for a reason.

The morning slips by quietly. We mostly chat about trivial matters, but the atmosphere between us has subtly changed. Esther no longer feels like an acquaintance, but like someone with whom you share something dangerous – and therefore intimate.

We decide that I'll go with her to her house. Well, decide... I just tell her. She thinks it's a good idea. After she's had a shower, we leave. Without her noticing, I slip my Glock into my coat pocket.

The streets are emptier than ever. There is literally no one outside, and the few shops are closed. Apparently, last night's commotion has frightened people. The grey sky makes the atmosphere even gloomier. Not a single soul is looking out of the window.

We walk side by side, hunched over, in silence. As we approach the square from yesterday, I say:

"I want to have a look here. This is where the attack took place yesterday." She nods. We turn into a narrow alley, covered with clotheslines strung high with wet clothes. The alley is dark and damp. In the distance, the light from the exit glows, leading out onto the square.

What we see there astonishes me enormously. The square is spotless and completely restored. The walls that had holes in them only yesterday have been repaired; the burn marks have vanished. A few builders are walking around among the scaffolding.

"They must have worked through the night", I whisper. Esther grabs my arm and pulls me along resolutely. "I don't want to be found here by the wrong people", she says breathlessly. I understand. Anyone snooping around here will attract the wrong kind of attention.

The streets near her house, on the other hand, haven't been cleared yet. There are bodies lying there, uncovered on plastic sheeting. I walk over, but Esther stays put.

"What was Jan wearing?" I call out.

"A lumberjack shirt, trainers, and jeans!" comes the reply from behind me. That matches my memory exactly. I see someone lying there in those clothes, but I can't say for certain if it's Jan. I walk back.

"You have to come with me. There's someone here in those clothes." She shudders, but comes with me. She stares at the body for a long time. The face is charred black and barely recognisable, but the hair and the clothes match.

"Then it's him", she whispers. She nods slowly, as if trying to convince herself.

We walk on quickly. There are dead bodies everywhere. At first glance, it looks like a battle between civilians and police officers, but why are so many officers dead? They had the weapons. And the numbers. Strange.

We're approaching her house. We just need to cross the junction when we hear a strange sound. At first, I can't tell where it's coming from. Then vehicles thunder past – oddly shaped machines in camouflage colours. Some have no wheels, but steel tracks.

I don't recognise them, but they resemble the vehicles from the old war books. The convoy is endless. Now windows are opening everywhere; people are leaning out, staring in silence.

When the noise dies down, I look at Esther.

“Now we know: we have an army. That’s going to be a tough nut to crack for the resistance.” She looks at me anxiously. She’s thinking the same thing.

“On the other hand”, I say, “how many of you are there, actually?”

“We work in cells”, she replies. “I only know a few people.” I’m surprised that such old resistance tactics are resurfacing. Apparently, I’m not the only one who’s saved books.

The front door of her house has been kicked in. Inside, it’s a mess. Drawers pulled open, cupboards overturned, everything ransacked. Instinctively, I put my hand on my weapon.

“Looters”, says Esther softly.

“I don’t think so. Do you have any valuables here?” She shakes her head.

“Just some clothes.”

“Gather them up, then we’ll get out of here.” She nods and walks up the stairs.

“It’s just as bad up here!” she calls from above. I don’t reply.

My eye has fallen on something on the floor. I bend down and pick it up: a metal triangle about two inches wide. Thin wires run from the three points. When I touch one of the wires, it seems to move of its accord. The metal feels warm – not like iron, more like something alive. I stare at it, fascinated, until I’m startled by Esther’s voice behind me.

“What’s that?”

“I’ve no idea. Never seen anything like it.”

“Be careful. You don’t know what it does.”

True. I hold it up to the light. It’s perforated with tiny holes – you can see right through it. When a thread touches my fingers, I feel a tingle. I find a small wooden box and place the thing inside. Esther tucks the box under her clothes, into her bag.

“I suppose I’ll be sleeping with you?” I nod. “We’ll have to sort out a proper bed for you. I’ve got an inflatable bed – the bike pump will do the trick.”

We walk back, this time taking a different route. Along the water’s edge. A lovely walk in itself, but I’m starting to get tired of lugging her bag. The sky remains grey; the clouds are racing across the sky again.

5 – THE RESISTANCE.

Inflating the bed is certainly a real chore. I've been pumping for half an hour now, and it's only about a quarter full. My arms are numb, so I'm taking a quick break.

"Wimp", I hear as Esther walks past. I give her a half-angry look. It's a shame that pump isn't working properly any more. I'll have to see if I can fix it, though I doubt it. But after half an hour, I've managed to get the bed up to a reasonable pressure. Only then do I realise it might have been better to check for leaks first. Fortunately, it still seems airtight.

I'm already getting a bit weird in the head at the thought that I should have inflated it again. Esther sits on it.

"It needs to be a lot firmer." With just her bottom on it, it does indeed sag quite a bit.

"That's where the valve is, but I think it's firm enough." I point to the large opening. She lies down, and the bed moulds itself to her body.

"You're right, it's not too bad."

"You can say it's comfortable, you know."

She laughs. "It is comfortable."

It's almost evening now. People who're still working are coming home, most of them on bikes. When I walk outside, I can smell food everywhere. I'm getting hungry myself and head straight for the fridge – which, as with most single men, is half-empty. The still life stares back at me. A pitiful little stalk of broccoli is the only edible thing.

"I'm going to pop out for some groceries. What do you fancy for dinner?" I ask, as if there's any choice at the supermarket.

"That broccoli's still fine, isn't it?" she asks, slowly shaking her head at the fridge.

"Yes, but we need something else to go with it." And off I go.

Fortunately, the supermarket isn't far. It's usually quiet there, but now I see empty shelves and frantic people. There's grabbing, pushing and grumbling. Not that I mind – it's been like this for years. He who hesitates gets nothing.

I find some potatoes and, to my surprise, a piece of meat as well. As I'm paying, I think to myself once again that I really ought to start a little vegetable patch. Then at least you'd have something decent to eat. Just to be on the safe side, I pick up some tinned food too.

The checkout is quick, but as soon as I step outside, my breath catches. He's standing on the other side of the square.

The tall, white man.