

## OLD NEW WORLD

### CHAPTER 1 - Dead Man

It was the morning of October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2038, when I committed my first murder. I was a middle-aged man and always had I been against killing, against war, against hate. And always, I thought, had I been *for* love.

But when the twenty-seven stone pebbles left my shot-gun and flew above our garden field, I knew that life, perhaps, was not only about love. Or at least; not about everyone's love.

I'm a father of two kids, and before the pebbles hit the strange man in his face and torso, so that blood splashed to all sides and onto our white-painted, wooden garden-gate, I had never thought that I would once become a murderer.

But it happened. And it had to be done. Elise and Noah were seven and five years old at that time. And they were playing, like they always did, in the garden of our little farm in the mountains. And just in time, Joanne had called them inside. And just in time, I had pulled the trigger.

Poverty had broken out in the cities far down in the valleys and in the overpopulated parts of the world. Death and destruction had begun to haunt the lands like evil ghosts, especially the big cities. There was a war, not between countries or races, but war amongst the people. War for food. War for clean water. War for survival.

Only, at that time, when I pulled the trigger of my shotgun, I was barely aware of the cruel happenings in the metropolises and of the poverty, and of the wars. Because our home was far away from the modern world. Far away and hidden somewhere in the Swiss mountains.

I knew not much about the miseries that a broken system brings with itself, but what I knew was this; when people starve, they can turn into animals. The primitive, core survival essence in any human being has no space for love and compassion. There is either fight or flight.

When I married Joanne, the world had already been close to the tipping point. Not many had expected the disaster. But like any great empire, the time of greatest confidence was also the time of greatest mortality.

And capitalism had lost its humbleness and enjoyed great confidence – so great, that it had to fail, one day.

Back then, just before our wedding, I wrote a small novel about a young man entering an adventurous journey to climb the greatest of all mountains. I could have guessed already then, that even the greatest mountain had a peak, and that, once at the top, the descent is always already awaiting. And usually, the faster you get to the top, the sooner you are descending.

My hands were shaking, and I felt the blood pumping through my veins as if I had just completed an Olympic sprint. It was a strange feeling. A cocktail of excitement, shock, and sadness at the same time. My rifle was still smoking, my mouth was open in my disbelief, and I smelled the gun-powder that crept through my nostrils.

The smell reminded me of the old days in the army. The Swiss army. The country which was considered neutral, sitting on its money and wealth, and historically profiting from battles and

misery around the world. Yes, the Swiss army – famous for its knife. We all had one, but rarely ever used it. We used guns instead. Guns for nothing. We shot on papers with human drawings on them. And as we shot, we had to pretend to be at war. Only, there never was one. Switzerland had been the country that perhaps least needed an army, but it was the country where all the young men were obliged to go. At least for a few months.

I always had thought that the army had been for nothing. That it was a joke. But now, standing in front of our porch, looking at the dead person at the gate and thinking about my kids, I was half-glad, that I had, at least a bit of training in handling a shot-gun.

I stumbled over to the blood-stained corpse that, just a few seconds before, had belonged to a man. I felt dizzy and tried to guess where he came from. I could see his legs, his hips, parts of his arms, but there was no torso – and no face. Only a few dark-red body parts which I imagined belonging to his skull and brain. His face got blown away. Literally. I had tears in my eyes. And those tears wouldn't be the last ones I'd wipe from my cheeks.

The door opened, and Joanne stepped onto the porch. Her mouth was open, and I saw her body was trembling – just like mine. She closed the door behind her to protect the kids.

I looked back at her, and then I picked up the blood-stained weapon that belonged to the man. It was a 9mm MP5, semi-automatic – the same we had used in the army. "Small world," I thought and searched him, got blood smeared, and eventually I turned around to walk back to my wife.

What an absurd situation it was. To look into the eyes of your beloved wife, while standing next to the man you've just murdered. I cannot describe the agony, the guilt and the shame I felt in those moments. Here was I, the murderous, blood-smeared, animalistic warrior on one side, and the soft, innocent, loving father, on the other. I walked back to her, trying not to show the pain that kept on trying to squeeze tears through my eyes.

"I told him to leave," I said softly with a quiet, shaky voice of despair and disbelief. "I told him, Joanne – I didn't want..." and then I wept, and Joanne answered by saying nothing but touching me with both hands on my neck. I knew that she was just glad to have me alive. And to have the kids alive. She hugged my bloody chest, and I collapsed into her shoulder. It felt good and warm to have someone with me in these overwhelming moments.

"Thank you for saving us," she said quietly.

In the military, they had taught us that the most devastating states of shock occur then when you're least prepared - mentally. Before our practice-missions, they used to show us pictures of destruction and death. The ugliest pictures and videos I've ever seen in my life. That's how a warrior prepares for the battle. He is ready in his mind.

But I wasn't ready when I pulled the trigger of my shot-gun on that sunny autumn morning. And neither was Joanne.

"I have to go inside," said Joanne after a few moments. "Noah is crying."

I nodded. "Keep them inside please," I said. "I'll try to clean up this mess."

I walked back to the wood-gate. With an old t-shirt, and with my hands still shaking, I tried to wipe to blood from the gate.

Joanne went inside to entertain the kids. We both knew that, at one point, we'd have to tell them what had happened. They would ask. Surely, they would. But how do you explain murder to a child?

I cried tears, and I was sweating through all of my pores, not from the warm October sun, but from the distress and guilt that I felt.

The body parts of the poor man were scattered all over the place, it looked atrocious, and twice I was close to vomiting all over him.

James, who must have heard the bangs, came down from his farmhouse and jogged steadily over the pasture. His mouth opened when he saw the bloody mess of scattered bones and flesh. After a short exchange of words and a short cry into his shoulder, he helped me digging the grave behind the house. We were mostly quiet. "I'll tell you everything later," I said when he asked, and he nodded and understood that it wasn't the time to talk.

Despite the distress, being in a state of shock became handy to me. I did what needed to be done. I functioned well, cleaned, dug, and we were able to scrub away the disgusting horrors in a couple hours.

Michael and Frank came down from their houses too – to see what had happened. And I told them the same as I had said to James. They wanted to help, but I sent them home. Then, James and I lifted the corpse and placed him into the grave. He was heavy. Like all people seem to be when the life-force leaves them.

When I, at last, had sent James home and was alone again, the unbearable feeling of guilt and shame returned and started gnawing on my soul. Like a dreadful virus, I felt how the pain expanded from my belly into my joints and then into my tense muscles. I was a murderer. I am a murderer. A killer. A savage. And I felt that I betrayed my family, James, Frank, Michael and their families who were living just on the other side of the pasture. I felt that I betrayed myself. And, perhaps, I did. But what choice did I have? He aimed first, and he nearly shot me.

But however cruel this man had been, I was almost sure that he must have had loved ones too, and like us, I was sure that he had just wanted to find happiness and peace. Perhaps, he had needed some food for his family and had come a long way from the city to the mountains.

Only, he could have asked for it with his words, and not with his gun. And, perhaps, his impoliteness had cost him his life, I thought.

Was it really that bad, down there?

The man seemed to have been willing to kill a whole family to get food. And that made me ponder. And it made me fear that a disaster had finally happened in the metropolises. What always seemed to be so far away, and what we had always wanted to avoid so desperately, had finally reached our little, secluded community in the Swiss mountains.

All day, I felt like crying but didn't allow myself to. I didn't want to place more weight on Joanne's shoulders. And I didn't want my kids to see my tears either. So, I waited until Joanne and the kids were asleep that night and cried quietly.

I visited Frank the next morning. Like James, he had his stone house a couple hundred yards above our little, self-made farm, on the other side of the green pasture. We kept each other alive, helped each other, listened to each other. Frank was tall. A foot, or so, higher than I was. Norwegian, dark-red haired, dark-red bearded. Big arms and legs and strong they were too. Frank was a learned gardener. A professional, you could say. I had met him in Budapest, more than twenty years earlier, when he had just launched his 'online gardening business.' He, basically, had drop-shipped seeds from China to customers around the world. You could do these silly things back then. And Budapest had been something like the European hotspot for online entrepreneurs. Then, when the internet was still accessible to almost everyone in the world, and when it was abnormal if you hadn't had immediate internet access in certain places. We lived in a remarkable world. A world where everything still seemed possible.

I, on the other hand, had just been starting my writing career and I had met Frank in a café and had made friends with him.

Frank had a twelve-year-old daughter from a past relationship, long after I had first met him. He had never been married and didn't agree with the whole concept of it, which was fine for all of us in our little mountain community. And yet, on the Alm, there were not that many potential partners to meet, and what made me worry about Frank, was the absence of a woman in his life. I believe that a feminine counter-pole, despite the troubles that it brings, can work wonders in the mood, happiness, and growth of a man. To me, having a wife like Joanne was like the charge for my battery that kept me going, and kept me healthy.

Frank and I sat on the front porch, looked down onto the long grass field and the mountain-peaks behind the many small valleys.

I repeated what I had said to Joanne, in the hope to find salvation within my soul and to justify my act of murder.

"I told him to leave us alone," I said, and I felt my voice shaking again. "The kids were playing in the garden, and he approached them, alone, with his gun. He pointed the freakin' gun at them and told them to call their parents, or they'd be dead at once."

"This is insane," said Frank.

"Elise came sprinting in 'Dad, someone is here with a gun' – Imagine hearing that from your own daughter," I said and looked at Frank. "I then took our shot-gun from the basement and told the kids to stay inside. My heart was racing. You can't imagine.

"I opened the door, stepped outside and cried 'what do you want?'

"But the man at the gate just laughed. 'Everything,' he said. It was this crazy, dangerous laugh," I felt my body trembling, and my eyes teared up as I recalled the happenings for Frank.

"'First you, then your wife, then your kids, and at the end I'll have your farm,' he said, and from then on, it all happened so fast.

"I told Joanne to go down to the basement with the kids. She refused, I shouted at her – I didn't mean to, but I needed the kids to be safe."

"Of course... God damn," said Frank. His cheeks were red, and I could feel his compressed rage.

"I then closed the door, and the guy pulled the trigger and shot in the air, and I knew he was serious. He made a few steps forward and entered the garden. Like a savage. A crazy madman. I cried, 'if you make one step closer, I'll have to shoot you!' I was scared to death, but interestingly, my palms and arms felt very calm. Everything felt calm and slow when I hid behind the cart.

"Then the man aimed at me and shot. He missed by a few inches, and for a moment, I wasn't even sure if he wanted to hit me or just scare me so that I surrender. But before I knew, I pulled the trigger. It hit him straight in the face. Smashed open his torso, blew away his head. And mind. Mind-blowing it was.

"It happened so quickly Frank," I began to sob, "so quickly – I shouldn't have shot. But I did. And before I knew, I committed murder."

I jerked and by saying those words I broke into tears again. As if my mind somehow didn't yet process the shocking events and as if the trauma had to be cried out in tears in order to release this surreal memory.

"You had to do it, Sam," said Frank and lay his arm on my shoulder. "What the hell? He aimed at you and shot. And if he'd killed you, he'd probably also killed Joanne. And the kids.

"You saved the life of your family, my man. You saved their god-blessed lives. You are not a murderer. You are a hero, Sam."

I heard his words but couldn't look at him.

"I cannot believe that this happened," said Frank. "Here. On the Alm. In our lovely peaceful home. This is insane..."

"And I never thought I will ever kill someone," said I.

"Well," he said. "Life is full of surprises." That perhaps slipped out of Frank's mouth before he was aware of what he was saying. Comedy of misery, I thought and couldn't suppress a smile.

"Full of surprises, indeed," I said. "And we always think we're in such control of everything."

"I'm telling you, Sam, there's a nasty time ahead. Maybe something happened in the cities. And maybe the people are fleeing to secluded places such as this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe they are out of food," he said. "Look at the weather and the big wildfires. These droughts must have raised the food prices."

I chuckled and couldn't believe Frank's wild speculations, "first, they'll plunder the big stores," I said.

"And what if the stores are already closed or secured by the army?" Frank said.

"And only the elite gets the provisions you mean?" I asked and chuckled again.

"People with no choice do wicked things," Frank said, and I again felt the bitterness of my recent murder. I knew that it would take me time to get over it. Did I have a choice? Could I have solved the situation without shooting the stranger into the head?

"I don't know much," said Frank, "but what I know is that the system is messed up. Remember when Michael wanted to get gasoline for the Quad-bike, in spring, but couldn't get it?"

"I remember," I said to him, "and the financial crash that he mentioned too."

"Yes, Sam. Now count one and one together."

"Hm," I said and got lost in thought for a moment, "I wonder if the economy has ever recovered since."

There was a silence, and I became aware of my heavy, mournful breathing and smelled the sweaty armpits of Frank.

"Isn't it good to live in a place where we do not depend on *market crashes*?" said Frank. "Just imagine the total disaster of a system collapse. I mean, anything could have happened. Financial inflation, unemployment, poverty, protests..."

"Please, don't draw the horror-scenario, Frank."

"I'm not drawing the horror-scenario, I'm just telling you, when the system breaks, everything in the system breaks. This includes water supply, electricity, education, healthcare..."

I thought for a few moments, "well, when the system collapses," I said, "the whole food chain would collapse too, I reckon. And the people in the cities can't have their own gardens. Can't have their own medicine or water. They are in a place where they need the system. They need a provider but haven't got one."

"That's what I'm saying," said Frank.

"We shouldn't speculate too much," I said.

"But it's good to keep it in mind."

"Yes, that is true. I wonder how it is down in the cities," I said. "And I really wonder if this man came up to our place because the system is struggling, or because he was just a madman."

As I said these words, I realized that, since Michael's unsuccessful attempt to get gasoline in the town far below in the valley, none of us had left the farm. We were oblivious to what happened in the world. We couldn't know. And only speculated. This *knowing of not knowing* frightened me, and it felt like another burden on my shoulders since I killed the stranger.

"Are you alright, brother?"

"Yeah, man," I said. "There's just too much stuff in my head at the moment."

"I know," said Frank. "And I'm sorry about what happened to you. We have to hold together now."

I nodded, "and we must inform the others today. Especially Michael and James. It's perhaps best if we all gather today," I said, "and discuss things throughout."

"Good idea," said Frank. "We can gather in the evening."

“Great,” I said quietly, and then we were silent for a bit and felt how the warm sunrays shone onto our faces.

“Let’s gather at the fireplace on the pasture,” I eventually said and stood up. “And Frank?”

He looked up, “what?”

“Thanks for listening. It helped me.”

“Of course, my friend,” he said with eyes that expressed true friendship. He understood my misery, and it felt good to be heard and accepted.

In my life, I had noticed that there are eyes that you simply cannot trust. And there are others you just feel loved by. Frank had the eyes of the latter. I never knew what made a human being trust another, but each time I somehow felt it. I could tell. Not by knowing it intellectually but through a hidden sense that lay beyond the mind and beyond the smart, rational understanding of the world. Just like love, there were things that needed no explanation.

When I made my way back down to the house, I contemplated the thought of encountering more people who’d find our farm. We couldn’t kill them all. In fact, I didn’t want to have any business anymore with murdering and shooting people. One was enough. It sickened me. It disgusted me. But what if this madman hadn’t been the only one, but just the first person who had found our place? What if Frank was right? And what would we do if hundreds would seek refuge?

I entered the white, wooden gate which I had built two years before. There was no more blood on it, but still, I smelled the scent of death. It made me shiver. I stopped and touched the gate with my fingers and felt the roughness of the wood, and I tried to forget the horrible killing of the previous day and think about all the beautiful memories this place carried from the past. It helped.

All of us had built our houses, and fences, and barns on our own – with material that had been very affordable in the past. I was glad and proud that we had spent our money when we still had gasoline to carry the material up to our small farms.

Little things, such as nails or screws proved themselves as extraordinary tools. I, somehow, always took them for granted, until I had my own house to build and my own fences and furniture to create. And it made me think about how blind we often were to the true value of certain things.

Joanne looked at me, while I was daydreaming at the gate. She was turning the soil in the garden, and when I saw her, she smiled. I loved her smile. It made me fall in love with her every single time, and it always let me forget my worries, even if it was just for a moment. I reminded myself to tell her more often how gorgeous she was. Because she truly was – and sometimes, in the commonness of the day, beauty gets overseen easily.

If there was something good to be found in murdering that strange man, it was that my loved ones were still alive and that I, more than ever, felt gratitude for the wonderful family I had.

My two kids were playing next to our little vegetable field. They used our broomsticks to imitate the stories of Harry Potter. Joanne and I used to tell them in the evenings. We didn’t have the

books at home, but once, in our early relationship-days, fifteen years back, we both listened to all of the audiobooks. I remember, it had taken us almost a year. And so, we had told and explained the wizarding world of J.K. Rowling to our kids, as much as we still had been able to remember them. It worked. Our kids made their own stories from it. Beautiful they were, I thought. Every vague story left space for imagination and creativity. And one thing that makes kids so admirable is that they are masters at improvising.

The two reminded me of my own childhood. We had been running around in the green and been imagining our own worlds too. And, only a few years later, in the early twenty-first century, kids started to be raised by phone, tablets and tv screens so that the childlike imagination of a whole generation had suddenly been substituted by a black mirror.

When Elise and Noah saw me, they ran towards me and into my arms. Like dogs, kids always seem to gain endless joy from your return. Even if you had just left an hour ago.

“Did you tell your mother already what a beautiful day it is?”

“Yes,” said Elise, she came closer to whisper something into my ear.

“I gave her a big, big flower bouquet,” she said.

“Wooaaah –” I whispered back into her ear. “Can I see it?”

She chuckled “I think it’s inside,” she said quietly.”

“Okay. I will go and see it later, alright?”

“Okay,” she said – as if we now had a little secret between us.

“And I, and I...” Noah looked up eagerly, to tell what gift he gave to his mother. My son. My dear son. He looked like his mother, and that made him even more beautiful.

“Yes, what did you give to Mama?”

“I want to tell it into your ear too,” he said.

“Of course,” I said as I ducked down again and let his five-year-old lips give me his message.

“I gave mum a wood-horse.”

“A wood-horse?”

“Yes,” he said with an indescribable cheer in his eyes.

“Wow, how did you manage to make a wood-horse.”

Again, he leaned towards me. “I found it,” he said in his sweet innocent whisper.

“You found it?”

“Yes.”

“Where?” I asked.

“In the forest,” he said.

I smiled but felt my muscles growing tense. My inner warrior of suspicion turned upside down, but I gave my best not to show it to him.

“Can I see the horse too?” I whispered.

“Yes. I think Mama also put it inside the house.”

“Excellent, then we will look at it later, okay?”

“Okay,” he said with a big anticipating smile.

I then got up, walked towards Joanne and hugged her.

“Happy birthday, my dear love,” I said and reached into my pocket to give her a Rhodonite-stone which I had found in the mountains with James and which I had later crafted into a bracelet.

“It is beautiful,” she said. And from the way she said it, I knew she liked it. I was glad, and it made me smile because I didn’t always find it easy to express my love for her in gifts.

“Noah gave you a wooden horse?” I then asked in a little more serious tone. And Joanne laughed.

“Well yes,” she said. “It looks like one.”

“Like – a real wooden horse?”

Joanne shook her head with a grin on her face. “It’s not a real one if you’re thinking about a handmade wooden horse,” she said. “It’s a tree root that – almost – looks like a horse.”

She snorted from laughter, and I felt my nerves falling back to their normal places again. I calmed down, my heartbeat sank, and so did my worries about our dear children.

“Ah,” I said, “good. Sorry, I believe I’m just a little more suspicious since the happenings yesterday.”

“It’s fine, dear,” said Joanne.

Hostility was not a nice state to be in. But I couldn’t help. My son found a beautiful little root in the forest, and I already pictured more people camping somewhere close to our house. More people who intended to threaten our lives, take possession of our farm, maybe even kill my kids. Fear creates hell. Even if it’s just imagined – it always feels real.

Joanne looked up and at me, “how are you, Sam?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I’m ok,” I said. “Got lots of work to do.”

I wanted to walk away, but Joanne didn’t let me pass.

“If you feel the need to talk about what happened yesterday – I’m here. Please know.”

“It’s your birthday...” I said.

“Even if it’s my birthday!”

I took her by her hand and looked into her eyes.

"I love you, Joanne. And I'm just glad that you and the kids are alive. I wish it weren't me who had killed the man. But I guess, that's how many things are. We have other things to worry upon now."

"We don't have nothing to worry, Sam. As far as I know, worrying hasn't brought us anywhere, or did it?"

I knew that she was right. She was mostly right.

We were supposed to gather with the other families in the evening. And when the sun began to set, I decided to visit the grave which I dug and buried the corpse with James the afternoon before. I took two wood sheets with me and nailed a cross for the dead man. I didn't know if he had ever been religious, but I found it to be the least I could do. I picked up some autumn-flowers which, since the climate changed, still bloomed in October, and lighted one of the spare candles we've had. On the cross, I wrote "*Benedict – May you rest in peace.*"

I decided to name the man Benedict, I thought it would help me to make peace with what happened. Benedict meant 'blessed.' "May you be blessed Ben," I said and carefully laid the flowers next to his grave. I felt horribly sorry, and I stuck the burning candle into the soil and knew that the wind would soon extinguish the flame again. Then I left Benedict and walked up the pasture to the fireplace to meet Frank, Michael with his wife and family, and James with his wife and family.

Michael and his wife, Alberta, arrived with us on the mountain pasture five years ago. They too were seeking a way out of the trouble and out of the endless, blind addiction of overconsumption. They owed it to their kids, they said. They had two of them. A sweet little family. Michael and Alberta were Austrian and beautiful people – in every sense of the word. They had their house a few dozen yards to the left of Frank's house, on the upper end of the pasture.

James Thatcher, English. An old friend of Frank and the funniest guy I knew, arrived two years later. Also with a family. He had three kids and a beautiful wife whose name was Christina. His oldest son's name was Mark, and he was already approaching sixteen. I had a great relationship with that young man. The house of the Thatcher's was all the way on the right if you looked uphill.

With my house below the pasture, the four farms looked like a triangle in the middle of a big, green patch of fresh grass.

"Alm" was how Michael and his wife would call our green field in the mountains of Switzerland. We were environed by a thick pine forest, and a little water stream passed just next to the Thatchers' house, all the way on the right. A secluded, secret place, we had. And a peaceful place it was. Mostly. Until I had had to shoot a man who wanted to kill my family and take over the farm.

Frank, Michael's family, the Thatcher's, and we were operating as a little community. We were the hippies of the new world. Together with all the kids, we counted fifteen. Together with the chicken, seven cats, four dogs, and four goats, we counted more than forty. We all needed each other because things are often easier together. I once read an African proverb that said: "If you

want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” I found this quote to be true but had to learn patience. Especially, when I first became a father. And especially, when you live a life in nature and try to build things without the help of big machines, that do the work for you.

I couldn't have been more grateful, back then, to have these people around me. I guess each of the families could have survived without the others but, perhaps, it would have been much harder, much more complicated, and probably a little boring. I always believed that our human species was meant to help each other out, and that we were social animals and not lonely warriors.

Through the need and reliance of one another, our friendship grew. Closer than any other friendships I've had experienced while living in the cities of the world. There, I had found, that the people seemed to be more separated from each other. Too concerned about their own businesses they were, and maybe, I was so too.

“Do you remember when we celebrated Joanne's birthday in Budapest fifteen years ago?” said Frank, “we were freezing our asses off.”

We laughed and sat around a campfire in the middle of the four houses on the green pasture. Our four families gathered there often when we were in the mood or when we had to discuss things of importance. It was the third of October – Joanne's birthday. The evening was warm. Of course, it was. The weather had become unpredictable – and hotter every year. So hot, that in summer, it rarely rained in the lower lands. Wildfires regularly haunted the forests, and, in summer, we could see the brown grass and dry trees in the valleys.

“And can you imagine that, just ten years ago, people would ski here?” said Frank.

I had to grin. “We'll soon have summer here in December. No need to go chopping wood anymore, guys. We'll be warm and sane the whole winter,” I replied.

They laughed.

“I think we still have some pictures of white Christmas evenings when I was a child,” said Alberta, Michael's wife. Tall, brown hair, blue eyes, full lips, and an Austrian accent that was so lovely to listen to. She was a wonderful woman, and, even in her thirties, she didn't seem to lose her youthful beauty. Just like Joanne.

“Snow?” asked one of her kids.

“Yes, snow,” she said with a grin.

“It was common a couple decades ago,” I said. “When you are older, we'll take you with us to the peaks of the highest mountains, there's still plenty of snow.”

“I'd like to join next time,” said Mark, the oldest son of James.

“Next time,” said James “we will take you with us.”

At around nine o'clock, our kids got tired, and Joanne decided to bring them back to their beds. She'll join us later again, she said. And Christina, Alberta, and Frank saw it as a sign, to bring their kids home too.

“Mark,” I said to the boy as he was just about to leave. “We want you with us tonight.”

Mark’s eyes widened, despite the darkness and the little light which the fire provided, I could sense how this positive surprise made him feel proud. Mark’s sixteenth birthday was only a week away, and we initially agreed to involve Mark into adult discussions after his birthday.

But due to the recent event – my trigger pulling the day before, I found it adequate to have Mark involved already.

A new era began. The dead man seemed to be the first desperate seeker from one of the cities – and if one person could find his way to the Alm, then it was likely, and perhaps just a matter of time, that others will be able to do so too.

We waited for Frank and the three women to return. James and I used the time to introduce Mark to what he was about to hear and that he now was a full-grown member of the community.

It was a matter of minutes when the women returned. Frank returned last. “Adolescent girls,” he said and shook his head.

Christina Thatcher, James’s wife, snorted, “you’ll get used to it,” she laughed. Their daughter, Sophie, was only a year older. They knew how it was to parent a child who didn’t really want to be parented anymore.

“Can you get used to this insanity?” Frank said.

“She’s not that bad,” I said and thought about my youth. “You should have seen me. I was the worst. I’m still sorry for my parents.”

“Yes, you just wait for your little Elise to grow up,” said Frank. “Karma is always just.” We all laughed.

Then, I threw the inevitable topic of the recent events into the round. I bent forward so that my face was visible in the light of the fire and explained what happened in detail so that everyone could hear it first-hand and didn’t have to make their own guesses.

It felt good to talk about it. And it felt even better when I sensed to be understood by my friends.

“However,” I said. “Frank and I reckon that this man may not be the last desperate person arriving here at the Alm...”

“What’s going on down in the cities?” asked Alberta in her Austrian accent.

“I don’t know for sure,” I said.

“Didn’t you, Michael, say something about the financial crash, when you went down for gasoline, earlier this year?” said James.

“Yes, obviously there was a crash. And it happened worldwide,” Michael said. “But that was many months ago. I don’t know how it all developed since then.”

“You reckon it was a major economic crash?” I asked.

“Well, I didn’t get gasoline, so yes. It might also be one of the greatest crashes in history.”

“As a consequence, the official currencies could have collapsed,” said James.

“That’s what Frank says,” I said.

“It’s my only explanation,” said James. “With the inflation comes a lack of food, lack of resources... Lack of everything! Imagine living in the city, depending on the stores but getting nothing at all. You can’t grow your own plants and food, because you either live in a flat and don’t have space for it, or you don’t have the knowledge to sustain yourself – or both! What do you do then?”

“Naturally people would try and steal it from others,” said Michael. “I don’t want to imagine how it must be like in some cities now.”

“Let’s not overdo it,” I said. “We don’t have evidence. The economy may have already recovered. But you’re right. If the system breaks down, then society breaks down.”

“It’s scary,” said Joanne.

“I knew this would happen,” said Frank. “This whole system was not sustainable from the beginning. They’ve built their own death-beds. They blindly consumed without considering anything at all. Now they pay the price.”

“Frank,” I said. “We don’t know anything about it yet.”

“I don’t care,” he said. “Isn’t it obvious? The signs are here that things broke down and I knew that they will break down one day. And humanity pays the price now. And we perhaps will have to do so too!”

“And that’s why that guy came up here and tried to shoot you and your family. A city’s home address is your death certificate if you don’t quickly find a way out there.”

“It could have also just been a single madman,” said Michael. “And nothing at all happened in the towns and cities.”

“Just watch,” said Frank. “In a few weeks, we will have more of those here.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” I said.

“I’m not pessimistic,” said Frank. “I’m realistic. And we need to find a solution on how we will deal with future madmen.”

“Stop it you two,” said Joanne. “Conflicting whether who’s right or wrong won’t bring us anywhere.”

I sighed, and there was a short silence until my dear wife continued. “I believe the question that is most burning now is; do we think that people are currently fleeing from the cities?”

There was another silence. “I don’t know,” I said. “I can imagine it, but I wish we knew more about the current happenings in the world.”

“And what will we do if more of them are coming?”

Her eyes pointed at me, and I felt that also Frank and the others were looking at me. I waited and thought. “This is the big question,” I said, “which we should discuss together.”