

Chapter 70
A simpler life
Saturday, April the 7th

The week following Easter was the first harvest after the end of the last world. It was a time of frantic activity for everybody, with short nights and hard labour. The machines Henry's workshop had rigged were operated by the vagrants, organised in work gangs, all day and deep into the night, lit by carefully monitored straw fires.

Erich permanently felt like the car's fifth wheel, with no place to invest his meagre efforts. Erich was too weak to work physically but unable to put his other talents to use.

Philip and Roger were compartmentalising the Program, ensuring they alone had the overview. They made deals in private with the heads of the other families, using the vague coordinating efforts of Mackenzie and Father Roberts.

The Program children felt bitter and often betrayed, and they had too little understanding or patience to consider Erich's position. The older teenagers, including the team members, were trying to get a piece of the pie from the big shots at the top, but as everybody else they wouldn't have their say in how the land was being divided.

The system of open accountability of the harvests Erich had advocated turned into complete mystery ; the leading personalities traded legitimacy for coercion and force. To Erich, it seemed as if Philip and Roger had become different people. Jim suggested that their former self came back, worsened by the violence of the whole situation.

Erich refused to persuade Mark or any other person in the Program, because it would have been perceived as feeble attempts to join in the political fight from a very weak position.

It was on the next Sunday after Easter that Henry finally set Erich and Jim free from their uselessness.

Henry was coordinating the efforts to take parts from a motorised harvester and built a second thresher-winnowing machine, much simpler than the first one. He requested the assistance of Erich and Jim, but it was mainly a pretext.

Erich and Jim found Henry and Matthew, along with half a dozen workers, in a large barn in Golden Meadow, close to the storm's flood limit. Erich was amazed to find the second machine already in the finishing stages after only two days of work.

Immediately after having greeted themselves, Erich asked : « Henry, how come it took you so long to make the first one ? »

Henry : « I'll let you think about it. »

Erich was at a loss, and realised he had lost some sharpness in his thinking.

Jim was a bit more stressed ; he asked nervously : « Henry, do we really have time for games ? »

Henry : « Not really, no. But I wanted to check if Erich, just like me, was burnt out. »

Erich replied : « I knew I would be, but not that badly. It's as if I was out of shape. »

Henry : « It's high time we go back to Joyeux-Tiburon, Erich. »

Erich : « Who is we ? »

Henry : « The three of us, and then those who want. It's a free country, isn't it ? »

Erich : « What will we eat, there ? »

Henry : « If Philip doesn't deliver what was agreed upon, he won't last long. We wanted to seed the rest of March Island and April Island as well. »

Erich : « There are no levees on April Island. »

Henry : « They we will do without, until next winter I guess. It's soon going to be much too hot for that kind of work anyway. »

Jim : « What was it with the first winnowing machine anyway ? »

Henry : « It's logical : I built it to be taken apart in several loads. So we can transport it to the Islands. »

Erich and Jim looked at each other in surprise : unconsciously, they had forgotten to think in that direction. Even Erich, who contemplated to grow his own wheat, hadn't thought it through.

Henry : « Now there's some other details, but I guess we can go out for a walk first. »

The other workers didn't mind the leaving of Henry, Erich and Jim. Although Erich was thirty-six, he already belonged to the Old Coots by now.

They walked in silence for over ten minutes when, in the middle of nowhere, Henry started to talk.

Henry : « First of all, I have to tell you both I'm not feeling too good. It could be Kuru, the cannibal's disease, but it could be anything else just as well. I'm an old guy, and after all that maddening work and emotions, I should be all worn up. »

Henry and Jim remained silent : there was no point in trying to cheer him up.

Jim asked : « How long ? »

Henry : « Months. »

Jim : « Like in two, three, or eleven, twelve ? »

Henry : « The first proposition. Anything beyond is bonus. »

Again, Erich and Jim remained silent.

Henry : « I'm very glad so many made it through the crisis. Now there is enough to eat for everybody. And Erich, you did exactly the right thing in saving the vagrants from starving. Those were the poorest of the poor. People that had been written off by their own families. Now they're alive and will have their say in the times to come. »

Erich : « I'm glad you're seeing it this way, because people keep reminding me of the other dozen children and women that were killed in order to do so. »

Henry : « That's because you're surrounded by children, and children repeat what the authority figures say. »

Erich picked up the hint directed against Philip and Roger, and it confirmed his hunch that these two were trying to destroy his influence.

Henry : « Had the harvest been a week later, nobody would have had anything to say about it. Apart from the Program's children, all the people you saved ate human flesh, prepared in a huge open-air factory. But that's not what I wanted to talk about. »

Erich and Jim were all ears.

Henry : « Tell me, Erich, have you made any progress regarding the Cantaloupe, the robots, these kinds of things ? »

Erich : « I didn't even have time to care about my own wife. »

Henry : « You see, you're the only one around who is able to think about these topics. Philip and Roger had you sorting out the relocation effort, because they lacked the organisational skills to do it themselves. »

Erich : « Aren't you a bit harsh here ? »

Roger : « A maimed grunt and a petty criminal, really ? They outreached their own potential because you introduced them to management techniques. Now they think they can rule over it all, forgetting the failures they have been all their lives. They're lucky they only have similar people in front of them ; if Peter or even only Old Kiefer were still here, they would spank those two and send them back where they belong. »

Erich laughed, but still objected : « No offence, but do you apply these criteria to yourself as well ? »

It was as if Henry had waited all this time for this opportunity to justify himself : « What I did, I did on my own. At least I tried, and technically I was good. I'm just not a businessman... »

Erich : « Don't worry, we are all alive thanks to you. Without biogas and electricity to boil water we would have had typhoid for weeks already, not even mentioning all the other gizmos. Now they're harvesting mechanically, and not by hand, and this is also thanks to you. »

Henry smiled : « In a few month's I'll meet Richard and thank him personally for how further he brought me. »

Erich was taken aback by the whole sentence ; he smiled because Henry was smiling when he said it. Silence followed.

Erich : « No, I haven't thought about the Cantaloupe. Nothing new happened, and Reginald didn't report anything new, so... »

Henry : « Those bastards ain't finished, let me tell you. They manufactured the whole crisis, and you, Erich, you let yourself get caught in small details. You lost the big picture. »

Erich was about to protest when Henry cut him off : « Without Catalina's hint we would all be dead right now. What Luis told you, or the hint Roger gave you about the robot, all of this didn't happen by chance. It's because you were able to process it, that's why they told you these things, and why you came to your conclusions. »

Erich thought it over, and realised Henry was right.

Henry : « In a perfect universe Peter would still be alive, and you could have delegated many tasks to him . We wouldn't be in this mess. But things turned out like they did. »

Erich : « It's true, but what can I tell you ? Right now, I can't say anything about these matters. »

Henry : « I can't think about it either, Erich, but I'll do whatever I can to help you fight these bastards. »

Erich : « What's on your mind ? »

Henry : « Steven came by yesterday evening and told me about your idea of me running a company... Philip told me nothing about that, I can assure you. Well, since I won't be around for much longer, this is what I think about it : we should seize the opportunity, right now, to build up clandestine industrial capacity. »

Erich and Jim were intrigued.

Henry went on : « These peasants are going to strip everything bare very soon. This is the time to transport whatever we can salvage down south, and hide it. Because the Cantaloupe will be watching, we would have to hide it under sacks of grain. Now is the chance. »

Erich : « Don't you think they're going to see us transporting the machinery ? »

Henry : « We'll hide this as agricultural machinery. But, you know what ? This is not even going to be your business, because I think Jim and I could take care of it instead. We need your brain activity on those high strategy stakes, Erich. »

Jim replied enthusiastically : « Cool ! I like this ! What about Matthew ? »

Henry : « Matthew is with me, Reginald too, as well as my boys. The thing is, it would have to be limited to them, after all it is supposed to be clandestine. So they would all have to work on a daytime routine as well. For now, it's only about salvaging what we can. And let me tell you, also,

this is not going to be much. Basically, apart from a small mechanical press and a furnace, it will be about the largest blocks of steel we can find. There are a few big ones, but then it will be the size of hammers and axes. »

Erich : « Large blocks of steel ? »

Henry : « We can always cut large blocks, or drill into them, but we can't really weld them, let alone melt them, into larger pieces. So the bigger the better. »

Erich : « What kind of industry do you think we should set up ? »

Henry : « I think we should be able to manufacture our own ammunition. »

Erich remained silent.

Jim : « It makes sense to me. It has been the most critical item in this crisis. »

Erich remained silent, thinking the project through.

Jim : « Erich ? »

Erich : « I was thinking about Avery's secret factory. It has to be somewhere around Joyeux-Tiburon. If we could find it, and only then, the whole project would be possible. »

Henry : « We have to consider it feasible. There might not be another opportunity for this, perhaps for years, or even centuries. »

They remained silent for a while. Finally Erich said : « You're right Henry, and I also think that it would be something to organise between Jim and you. I am still highly visible ; soon Philip or Roger might have a spook watching over me. »

Henry and Jim agreed.

Erich : « In the mean time, I think I should visit Anna-Lena and Björn. »

Henry had a little laugh : « Well... Connolly already did. They're at his place right now. They're all right, and so are the goats. I've been told they wear sunglasses all the time. »

Erich had a bright smile when hearing the news. He worried about their possible drowning during the flood, but didn't want to re-establish contact with them during the relocation for reasons of confidentiality.

Erich : « As I told Philip and his gang last Sunday, I don't discount the possibility of my assassination. People will have to function without me. »

Henry : « You set up this flexible, decentralised management. Most people didn't understand it, but it worked so far. We would need something along these lines, but rather as a side job. People will assist the clandestine effort only after the main job is done. After all, it's not like they're going to be paid for it. »

Erich nodded in silent approval. After some more thinking, he added : « I guess this applies to my strategic thinking as well. »

Henry and Jim agreed. Jim asked : « What are you going to do officially now ? »

Erich was surprised by his own answer : « I guess I could be a teacher. »

Two days later, in the silver light of morning, Erich and Robert were loading the Gliding Dragon with improvised sacks of grain, stacking them onto a variety of construction materials for Three Acorns. Quality tools, some very specialized, were hidden on the bottom of the ship, destined for the clandestine industry project.

Diane was counting the sacks of grain ; she looked tired and empty, as if all hope had disappeared from her eyes. Erich felt as if she wanted to ask him why he was leaving, practically abandoning

them to the whim of power-hungry amateurs.

But she knew the answer already. She was going through the stages of mourning, almost routinely, like so most people around her after months of violence and despair. It didn't even have to be told in words ; after all, it was an intimate matter. Just like wounds wouldn't scar faster when being talked about, the mourning was now an internal, organic process. In some occasions the scarring wouldn't complete, or wouldn't even occur at all.

Handmade bundles of straw were brought on the ship's bow, opposite to the steam motor. Out of habit, Robert went to a very precise small spot by the combined solar/steam motor and started it. Erich placed himself at the bow, seized a long pole and started punting. The Gliding Dragon huffed and puffed, then started to move slowly.

Erich and Robert silently waved Diane goodbye. Diane turned around and burst in tears.

The journey southwards went on in silence. There was a time to talk and a time to focus on the tasks at hand. Around noon, the Gliding Dragoon approached a dock in the middle of Joyeux-Tiburou, close to a communal house where a wind turbine had been set up.

A group of over twenty seniors was waiting for them by the dock ; they were almost naked, but remarkably clean, the women's long hair floating lightly in the breeze. Back at a distance, near the communal house, their clothes were drying on a line.

They helped Erich unload the four sacks of grain marked for them. The first sack was placed on an improvised wheelbarrow and swiftly brought to the communal house for immediate processing.

This was a time to talk, following a precise pattern : Robert would transmit news from the North, and one of the seniors would give news from the town. Afterwards, Robert would report news from the North and the town to the Western Trawler and gather other news there.

The departure of Erich from the North was part of the formal exchange of information, which ended before the unloading was complete. It left some time for more personal chat. The old man, dressed with only a Budweiser towel around his waist, asked Erich : « How do you feel, Erich ? »

Erich replied in the same pace as the formal exchange : « I'm tired. I've been very sick and I still feel weak. But I've got to build a proper house for my wife back at Three Acorns, she's pregnant and it's due any moment now. »

The old man smiled and replied : « That's good. We need new people in this world. »

Robert, out of habit, blew into a small whistle and said : « Off we go now. Bye, see you tomorrow ! »

The old man waived goodbye and immediately left for the communal house, from which he would spread the news, and gather some more.

As the ship neared the end of the canal, Robert instructed Erich on setting up the sail. He stopped feeding the motor's boiler at a precise moment, so that the remaining heat would be enough to bring the ship into the bay, from which the sail would take over.

It was a very technical and precise affair. Erich saw that Robert had maintained decisive spots free of cargo in order to operate the sail as efficiently as possible. Robert was very concentrated, as the wind direction of the day was not easy to deal with.

Neither Robert nor Erich needed to monitor the ship's speed : out of habit, they knew that it would take hours to cross the bay and get to the narrower canals towards Three Acorns. Robert used a magnifying glass to light up some straw and get the boiler going again. The combined motor took over as soon as the ship entered the canal, and the sail was brought in. Erich immediately resumed punting the heavy ship through these familiar waters. Finally, he was going home.

Erich's heart pounded heavily when he saw Three Acorns' wind turbine at a distance. His mind had troubling switching from one world to another, another sign of the accumulated burnout.

There were several people waiving to them. Erich missed one punting move to greet them back. Robert, more familiar of the place now, flatly declared : « They're not greeting, they want us to get there as quick as possible. »

Erich was struck by terror. Kathryn was nowhere to be seen. Erich knew that if Kathryn was in trouble he would probably lose his mind, permanently.

Only Björn remained close to the shore when the ship made its final approach. He shouted : « Kathryn just broke water ! »

Robert commented just as flatly as before : « Oh great, now this. »

Erich asked : « What to do ? »

Robert replied : « Don't know. I'm just as new to this as you. »

Erich : « Yeah, great, indeed. »

Robert threw a rope to Björn, who secured the ship.

Björn asked Robert : « Can you spend some boiling water from the engine ? »

Robert : « I can, but what for ? »

Björn : « Anna-Lena said warm water helped to ease the pain, and prevent tearing. But I have a different reason : there is no soap, and if we want sterile textile we have to boil it. »

Robert replied : « Makes sense. Got a pot ? »

Björn rushed back to the living area.

Erich was lost ; he asked Robert : « What do I do ? »

Robert : « Man, your brain sure is fried. Well, what do you think ? Go see her ! »

Erich rushed ashore and hurried to the military tent from which Sue's and Anna-Lena's voices could be heard, but as soon as his head entered the tent he was ordered out.

He felt more out of place than before. He stood where he was, in case he was going to be needed after all. Björn returned from the ship with a pot full of steaming water.

Björn understood Erich was in a mild state of shock. He gently suggested : « Why wouldn't you start to unload the ship in the meantime ? »

Erich nodded mechanically and proceeded to the task. Robert and Björn joined in the effort, and after half an hour the boat was unloaded, save for the grain sacks which would be processed on the Western Trailer.

Robert lost no time in leaving the place : after all, he had a tight schedule to follow. He shook Erich's hand with strength, hoping for the best.

Erich said : « Will you tell Florence to get here ? »

Robert looked Erich straight in the eyes and had an enigmatic smile. He remained silent and punted the ship away from shore, occasionally steering the ship's rudder with one feet.

Erich and Björn brought the construction materials, mainly metal sheets, on the Lowlands. The Lowlands had been cordoned off from the Highlands in order to prevent the goats and horses to get to the veggie patch. In fact, most of the Highlands had become a single giant veggie garden.

Kathryn's shouts and cries could be heard from anywhere. There was nothing Erich and Björn could do to help, so after having transferred and sorted the materials out they proceeded with the evening chores. Björn took the Ticonderoga and left for the Western Trawler, in order to get the evening's bread. Erich proceeded to rotate the bioreactor's content, then drag the fermented faecal matter to the other end of the island and empty it there. The animals followed him, out of boredom.

He knew he was surrounded by an incredible wealth, in this new environment, and yet to defend it they had two shotguns with five shots between them.

After the chore, he proceeded to take a long bath into the sea, rubbing himself clean with sand. He couldn't help feeling like a stranger on his own land. In fact he was a stranger everywhere by now.

Erich then proceeded to water the plant in the dwindling light of the evening. He thought several times Kathryn was about to die inside that tent. Erich felt hungry, and ate the little remaining flat bread that had been baked in the morning.

When Erich switched the wind turbine's light beacon on, he realised Björn could have heated the island's own water from the cisterns.

Björn returned from the Western Trawler shortly after. The wind carried a very appetizing smell of freshly baked bread and the very distinctive smell of grilled shrimps. Erich's mouth watered immediately.

Erich asked Björn : « We have shrimps ? »

Björn : « Old guys in town showed us where and how to fish them. There is still quite few of them, but it's not like we're going to export them anyway. »

Erich nodded in awe. Björn showed him a small dish were ten grilled shrimps on it, two per person.

Erich asked : « Björn, why haven't we heated our own water ? »

Björn replied with a sorry look : « Oh, right, you didn't know. Our cooking plates broke down. »

Erich : « What about the plates of the radio boat ? »

Björn : « These were our plates. »

Erich : « Wait... no, we brought another set before I left. »

Björn : « Florence asked for them before Anna-Lena's and I came to Three Acorns. Sue and Kathryn were too afraid of her to say no. »

Erich realised Björn hadn't brought Florence back with her.

Erich : « What's the deal with Florence anyway ? »

Björn : « She thinks she runs things around here, and decided the pregnant women deserved one and a half ration. Actually there is evidence she eats two rations by herself. »

Erich : « Why didn't anybody react ? »

Björn : « The adults here are mostly pregnant women. Some of them weren't too sad when she ordered the increased rations, and all of them think they will need her as a midwife. »

Erich : « But Anna-Lena thinks she can do it just as well, right ? »

Björn : « Well, she did assist in three calvings, and she read midwifery books. »

Erich : « And tonight she will have her first hands-on experience... Well, I guess it's too late to change anything about it, isn't it ? »

An immense roar erupted in the tent.

Björn answered : « Yeah, I think it's too late now. »

Cheers soon followed the final screams. For Erich, cheers meant both were alive and well.

Erich approached the tent nervously, his eyes opened in anticipation.

Anna-Lena walked out of the tent, her hands still covered in blood. She smiled at Erich, then rushed towards Björn and broke down in tears in his arms.

Erich entered the tent cautiously. The air was damp, warm and had a strong smell of blood and various body fluids. The interior was dimly illuminated by a single LED torch ; Sue was gathering up the stained cotton sheets, in the middle of which she placed an old glass vase, inside which the placenta had been put away for cooking – at Anna-Lena's request.

Erich could recognize a considerably strained Kathryn, her eyes half-closed in exhaustion, holding their naked newborn in her arms. Kathryn started to weep as soon as she recognized Erich.

She tried to speak, her chin trembling, but all she managed to say was lost in a weak weeping nonsense. Erich smiled and kissed her gently.

Kathryn's eyes opened up as she smiled. She looked at the baby. Erich put his right hand on the baby's head, then made a cross sign over him. Erich examined the baby, a boy, which was in good health.

Erich and Kathryn had long been hesitating between naming a boy Henry, after Erich's father name Heinrich, or Glenn, after Kathryn's father.

Erich let the decision to Kathryn. Kathryn simply said : « Henry. »

Erich nodded and said : « Welcome to your home, Henry. This is your land, your own land. I wish you a long and righteous life. »

Kathryn smiled faintly and commented : « You Germans... »