

## Chapter 74

Thursday, June the 27th. Early morning.

Because they arrived so late, Erich had taken Gus to Water Wells, in the hope of finding a way to spend the night there.

Erich wasn't quite sure of what he would find there, some mixture of a saloon in a western movie and a more gritty place like an African diamond mine. What he saw left him unimpressed : the place was as dull as the parking lot to a cheap suburban strip-tease joint.

The large barn was surrounded by very small makeshift cabins, probably used by the prostitutes for their trade as well as for sleeping. At a distance, one could see the night patrol of two guards around a steel fence, inside which were five to six shipping containers.

An old woman was posted at the entrance of the barn, sitting on a bale of hay. Erich recognized her from the evacuation meeting in town, where she asked many unwelcomed questions. She recognized him too, and let him and Gus enter without saying a word.

The inside of the barn felt warmer than the warm summer night outside, full of dampness and strong body odours, with a hint of freshly brewed beer.

In front of a high-quality stage supported by metal tubing, there were about eight to ten patrons sitting in assorted garden chairs or banks, gazing the amateurish but disturbingly effective strip-tease show of a fourteen-year old girl. What made the strip-tease especially eerie was the total absence of music or even noise for that matter.

Erich also recognized her. She had been one of the abandoned people he managed to save through the Water Wells massacre, that took place a few dozen of yards away from the stage. She would probably been one of those who ran after the scattered and terrified children, slitting their throats and drinking the warm gusts of blood as a matter of immediate survival.

Now that she survived, she was making her way in life the best she could. Jim once told Erich that many of these abandoned people still had relatives in the non-Program farms. Whenever they met, both sides often acted as if unrelated. Their families were a matter of genetics, not groups united by love or ancestry.

Once the girl was naked, she proceeded to masturbate herself in front of the audience without hesitation nor shame. Erich and Gus exchanged stern looks and walked to the bar, a real purpose-made bar from before the crisis. From there, Erich had a better look at the audience. They were all much better dressed than the locals, wearing common urban clothing, with perhaps a less thorough washing and slightly more wear than before the crisis.

The barman himself was evidently a man from the city, a bald man in his late twenties, covered in artful tattoos, with the muscles of a body-builder and a neatly trimmed goatee.

Erich asked : « It is possible to see Jonesy ? I'm Erich. »

The barman replied with a mocking smile : « Hi, I'm Steve, and I don't know who you are. You'll have to pay for whatever you'll find in Water Wells. »

Erich : « What are the prices ? »

The barman replied : « We made a list, in grain, just there. »

There was indeed a long list written with a marker on a white car hood at the end of the bar.

The barman commented drily : « You don't look as if you've got any grain at all. That shotgun, I can

buy it from you, for sixty pounds of wheat, or thirty pounds per shotshell. »

Gus remained unimpressed and Erich smiled politely : « We have nothing to trade, we just wanted to see Jonesy. »

The barman tried to evaluate Erich's importance, but there was too much conflicting information. Erich was evidently a man of some intelligence and status, but it was obvious he had sweated until the last hour or so, and he was accompanied by a strange fellow, perhaps a bodyguard of sorts, who smelled of fresh excrement.

The barman said : « I'm sorry, that's not possible. I'll ask you to leave now, if you please. »

Erich and Gus complied immediately. While walking to the exit, Erich looked at the stripper, who was now inserting a wobbly pink dildo into herself. While her face was acting in the required mimicry, her sombre eyes locked into Erich's, as if to say : « You know who I am, I know who you are, this is my life now. »

Erich nodded in stern agreement to whatever she tried to express, given the circumstances. It was only once outside that he remembered how he saved Crystal. Among the women of that trade in the area, the story must have been told and elaborated upon. Perhaps the stripper didn't want Erich to indulge in some misplaced heroism or simply to make any trouble.

Erich and Gus walked under the stars towards the Program area. They passed the tree under which a clan family leader once was humiliated then killed, on Erich's orders. That tree marked the limit to the Program's territory.

Erich and Gus slept under another tree until the early morning. After having washed themselves thoroughly, they ventured inside, towards the Administration, where Johnny could be located. Each farm was organising itself for morning chores, washing and breakfast. In each compound, one boy was tasked to retrieve a large, freshly baked bread from the central compound.

Gus watched over this new environment with great attention, often stopping to look at a detail, hear some conversations over or have a larger view at the whole. The fields and gardens were well kept, the boys as well as the girls clean and their hair well combed, the clothes very worn but smelling like industrial soap. Some greeted Erich with respect.

Gus turned to Erich and made small nods, approving everything he saw and complimenting Erich by the same way. They were about to enter the Administration when a child called at a distance : « Dad ! Dad ! It's me ! ».

Erich saw Gus freeze under shock, his eyes widen by fear. It was obvious that Gus had blank nerves, from his repeated tortures, and struggled to regain control. Erich whispered : « It's okay Gus. »

Gus turned into a pose, like some pompous statue, the shotgun proudly shouldered. He closed his face, then turned around with his whole body, like a German officer – or, more likely, like a DHS officer.

A boy was running to him with eyes widened by expectation and fear : what if it wasn't his father ? Gus remained somewhat static, but managed to call with his broken voice : « Johnny ! »

All of a sudden, Gus broke his pose and took his boy into his arms, holding him in a very strong embrace. The boy was almost choking, but happy nevertheless.

On the road, countless children witnessed the scene, with a sense of shock. One girl started to weep uncontrollably, then the weeping spread to the younger, then to the teenagers. All of a sudden, they were remembering and mourning their lost parents and family.

Erich felt overwhelmed by emotions, and didn't know how to react. He looked panicked, and not at all as the resolute leader he once had been.

Gus rose up and woke Erich from his paralysis, pointing at his throat. It took a while for Erich to understand, until he turned to Johnny and said : « It hurts your daddy to speak. I'll tell you things for him, all right ? »

Little Johnny agreed, impressed and puzzled.

They all entered the administration, where Jim was barely finishing to dress up. Ms. Ling was already ready to leave, and almost ran out of the house.

Jim, slightly miffed, commented dryly : « I knew it was you, Erich, when all those children started crying at the same time ! »

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Gus spent the morning alternating between tears and regaining a somewhat misplaced manly posture. He didn't want Johnny to remember him as broken man.

Johnny was deeply impressed by the inexplicable return of his father, and it was difficult for Erich to explain it in terms he could understand. After a while, when Houma was mentioned during the conversation, both Erich and Gus noticed that Johnny's eyes went to the shotgun, lying on the table. Although Erich tried to mitigate these feelings, he knew that the child would harbour a lifelong defiance towards the people in this city, if not hostility.

One of the civil servants brought a steaming hot bread from the compound. It was high-grade bread, that would have been accepted at a bakery final exam. Jim said that all girls were learning to bake bread like this, since this was now considered the norm.

Johnny asked : « Are you going to live with us, now , daddy ? »

Gus' eyes, already reddened by so much tears and emotion, took a sad stare. He looked at Erich and pointed southwards.

Erich said : « He's going to live with Diane and me at the library. »

Johnny was obfuscated : « Why ? Why doesn't he want to stay here? »

Gus was embarrassed, but Erich knew that sometimes it was better to be blunt.

Erich : « Your father has been injured very badly, so he poops in his trousers without noticing. Like a baby. We can't fix it, nobody can, and so your father doesn't want people to think you, Johnny, are the son of someone who poops like a baby all the time. »

Johnny was disgusted with disbelief. What a strange story did these two invent, why not a better story ?

Erich went on : « Your father is intelligent, he understood many things before they happened, this is why these bad people wanted to hurt him. He wants to help us with his intelligence at the library, and at the workshop. We all need him there, and he wants to be there too. You can visit him whenever you want. He will also come to visit you from time to time. When we'll have paper, he'll write you every day. »

Gus' throat, constricted with emotion, croaked : « Yes. »

Johnny was overwhelmed by the situation.

Erich concluded : « But today we stay here. We'll leave tomorrow morning with the ferry. »

Gus was embarrassed. He didn't want his son to witness his handicap, but understood what Erich was trying to do.

After a while, Johnny took his father for a tour of the Perimeter, while Erich would stay with Jim.

Erich asked : « Perimeter ? »

Jim : « That's our name, now. The Program has ceased to exist. »

Erich : « I knew it would come to that. There is no longer a Program unifying this place with Joyeux-Tiburon. We're two separate entities now. What about the ferry ? »

Jim : « The leaders want to pay for most of it, but Joyeux-Tiburon has to contribute as well. »

Erich : « I guess it will come down to giving Robert a lunch every working day, and perhaps keep him over the week-end, while the...Perimeter provides the fuel and the rest of the stuff. »

Jim : « Well, probably. A few months ago this matter would have been settled in seconds. By you. »

Jim and Erich were sitting on their chairs while the two civil servants were busy sorting out scraps of paper and entering the information onto a discarded laptop from Houma that Reginald resurrected. It was evident they kept unusually quiet in order to overhear the most of the conversation.

Jim and Erich didn't mind. The time of strategic planning was over, and they were both sidetracked.

Jim : « Erich, I don't know how I'll be around. Is there anything left for us to do ? Or are we really over it ? »

Erich : « I don't know. I have yet to make sense of that crisis. Perhaps if I visited Houma, I could have a better impression of it all. »

Jim : « Are you planning to go there ? »

Erich : « Last time I was there, I nearly ended up like Gus. Besides, those who tortured Gus also dropped bombs at my place, remember ? »

One of the civil servants had to correct one typing error, and thus the keyboard was heard again for the first time in minutes. It was as if the civil servants didn't even dare to breath , lest they missed a juicy bit of information.

Jim : « I understand you, but what if you see something important there ? You know, like that thing with the wheat, before the crisis, or that other thing with the robotic trawler at night. »

Erich : « No Jim. I don't think I would gather much, and the risk is too high. What Jonesy might see or hear is better. »

Jim : « That Jonesy guy... he's becoming too dangerous. »

Erich : « He's taking control over the Outer Farms, since you call them like that now. Somebody had to do it, and he does it the easy way. The ... Perimeter is well run, those Farms were a mess. »

Jim : « Yes, but then what ? »

Erich : « See him like a neighbouring head of state. »

Jim : « The leaders don't see it that way. »

Erich : « They'll have to, sometimes people have more power than you. What count is to remain alive and free. »

The silence in the room was so complete it seemed the noise from outside were dampened by it.

Jim : « All these people, they're working the land so hard, it's all their now. They're never letting any of what they earned go away. Soon I'll have trouble finding food for the Administration. Good thing we started a garden on our own. »

Erich : « Oh, there will be taxes, you can be sure of it. If they don't cooperate one with the other freely, they will be made to. Same old story. »

Jim : « What if they don't ? »

Erich had a hard laughter. For a moment, his forgotten German accent came through, and it sounded like the laugh of a terribly cruel German officer in a war movie.

Erich reassured Jim : « They'll come to us, or to whoever they trust. If they don't, they'll have to obey whoever takes over. They wanted power, now they have it, with all its implications. As for myself, I'm glad I have been pushed aside. My health almost recovered, and I sleep much better. »

Jim : « But Erich, look around you, these are all children, lead by late teenagers. You cannot let them down. »

Erich : « Jim, as you said, we're not getting younger, and one day we won't be here anymore. Let them try, let them make mistakes. Let them grow up. »

Jim : « What if the mistake is too big ? »

Erich : « They'll make these big mistakes if they think we're going to pick the pieces up afterwards. People are much more cautious when there are no safety nets. »

Jim : « I don't think we can afford that. »

Erich : « Nobody around has to power to attack the... Perimeter. Except if Houma runs out of food, then we're back to square one. Evacuation, war, cannibalism... You now the drill. »

One of the civil servants couldn't help exhaling an anguished sigh.

Jim : « Erich, won't you do any contingency planning for that case ? »

Erich : « If my minds gets idle, I might. But the thing is, without strategic reserves, the plan is nothing more than an elaborate daydream. Do you think any of our apprentice peasants will ever obey to a structure above them that will take a part of the harvest as a strategic reserve ? Only nobility and priests did that in the agricultural societies. »

Jim : « Are we going to get there ? »

Erich : « That's quite probable. I think our clergy would be up to the task, when the time is right. »

Jim remained silent for a while. The civil servants returned to work, only to stop at once when the discussion resumed.

Erich : « The big thing is going to be the harvest at the end of August. Then we'll have an idea of what our economy really looks like. »

Jim had a small laugh : « Did you know Matthew is currently working on a power loom ? He's anticipating that people will cultivate hemp over the winter. »

Erich : « The idea is not bad at all, but I think we're going to be shorter on food than anticipated. This is the first season where we will have done everything, from sowing to harvesting. The last harvest, although damaged by the storm, was still owing to mechanised agriculture. »

Jim : « You mean, we can't get everything right on the first try ? »

Erich : « Without Connolly's advice we would all be looking at a much grimmer picture for August. I tell you, the worst that can happen in the long term is a bountiful harvest which feeds overconfidence and resource dispersion. »

Gus and Johnny returned from their walk. Gus was very embarrassed, and only entered to grab the washing bucket. He swiftly limped to the garden.

Johnny had a sad look : « I understand now why he doesn't want to to stay here. Jim... Will you pay for the ferry when I'll go visit him ? I will pay you back, I promise. »

Jim : « You're not that heavy. If you help Robert and paddle when told, you'll be able to travel for free. But only you, got it ? Not the other children. »

Johnny's face brightened moderately. All of this was clearly too much for a single day.

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When the evening came, young people from all over the Perimeter gathered for the evening mass. Gus, his clothes clean again, attended to it with his son by his side. Erich could see Gus was not

very religious, but he took his task seriously. The Church would contribute to the child's upbringing in his absence.

After the mass, Gus walked his son back to his compound before dinner started there. It was heart-breaking to see father and son say goodbye, but in the end both had better hopes for the future.

Father Francis invited Erich and Gus for dinner, because he was preoccupied with the psychological balance of a man tortured until recently. When at the priest's place, Gus was disappointed to notice the absence of paper : during the afternoon, he became unable to speak.

Erich suggested them to wet the dusty ground outside and use it as an improvised clay tablet. After a copious vegetable casserole and one boiled egg per person, the three men went outside with a bucket of water and walked for a while, eventually sitting down in an area far from prying eyes.

Father Francis didn't know where to start, so Erich asked the first question : « Gus, what happened to the other people who were jailed with you. »

This was a milk run for the communication procedure.

With an improvised stick, Gus wrote in playing-card-sized letters : « ALL DIED. »

Although they expected it, the blunt answer came as a shock to Erich and Father Francis.

Erich : « Can you tell us more ? Who were they ? »

Gus : INFORMATION = TORTURE

A chill ran both Erich's and Father's Francis back.

Father Francis : « Were they torturing people because of their beliefs, or political ideas ? »

Gus wiped half of his last answer with some water and completed it : INFORMATION ONLY

Erich asked : « What about you ? What did you tell them ? »

Gus answered : « ALL »

Erich was about to ask the next question when Gus went on : FRIEND TOLD ME TRUTH = LIFE

Father Francis was impressed and muttered something to himself. The Gospel could be found everywhere.

Erich asked : « What happened to this friend ? »

Gus wrote : TOO SMART = DEATH

Erich couldn't help saying : « Holy shit ! »

All of a sudden, Erich felt again lying in the cross-hairs of those terrible, unseen foes that destroyed so much in his life.

Father Francis understood Erich's trouble and went on with the questions : « But you were a survivalist. You were smart as well, or not ? »

Gus answered : ONLY FOOD & GUNS

Father Francis : « But then how come you became survivalist ? You people saw it coming, all this crisis, didn't you ? »

Gus wiped the end of the last answer and wrote : ONLY FEAR

Erich nodded to show he understood : even if Father Francis didn't understand, he would explain it to him later. Now it was important to proceed with the conversation.

Father Francis asked : « Why do you think they let you live ? »

Gus : SEX PET

Father Francis made a disgusted figure. He asked : « Who used you, my son ? »

Gus : ALL

Father Francis : « What do you mean ? Every single one of these guys ? »

Guy nodded.

Father Francis was too disgusted to go on.

Erich took over : « Did you hear anything about the guys from the information exchange ? »

Gus : TOP PRIORITY

Erich : « Do you think the interrogators were bright enough to handle those guys ? »

Gus answered : WEBCAMS

Erich replied : « That's important to know. But the interrogators themselves, without whoever was on the internet ? »

Gus made a waving gesture with his hand, signalling he was not so sure.

Erich said : « One of these days, you'll have to describe or draw the faces of those you think are the smartest and the most dangerous people there. »

Gus nodded and asked : KILL ?

Erich : « Perhaps later, if things go bad with Houma. »

Gus : FUTURE ?

Erich had a small laugh and turned to Father Francis ; « Why does every one I meet think I can see in the goddamn future ? »

Father Francis answered smoothly : « My son, it's because you can. »

Erich made an embarrassed face that made Gus laugh silently. It was the first time Erich saw Gus laughing ; it gave him a twisted face.

Erich said : « All right then. It all boils down to the food situation in Houma. If they can't have enough they'll send most of their people on a war against us. It reduces their numbers while securing them with enough resources.

Father Francis asked : « What do we do then ? »

Erich : « Jim asked me the same question. We can't resist Houma. We'll have to flee, again. We'll have to set a strategic reserve to start all over again, perhaps in Joyeux-Tiburon. People have large gardens there, it will help the transition. »

Father Francis : « Why then did you envision killing some of them ? »

Erich : « As you've seen, waging a war and organising an evacuation, or rather, an exodus, requires not only organisation but skill. If we manage to take down critical people, it may cause enough disruption to allow us to flee, to take as much people as we can. »

Father Francis : « You mean, you plan to do the same thing as those people did to you when they bombed you ? »

Erich : « My Father, just imagine what would have happened to our people if they succeeded. »

Father Francis opened his eyes wide : « It's true. »

Erich : « Avery would have been in charge. Corrupting Roger back into bad habits. Cutting deals with the Saviour's Soldiers in town. »

Father Francis : « These satanic heathen would have killed me and Father Robert. Killed or worse. »

Gus nodded.

Father Francis asked, on the verge of panic : « Why ? What have they done to the priests there ? »

Gus only made the gesture of slitting his throat.

Father Francis : « No exceptions ? »

There was a glimmer of hope when Gus started to write down something : ALL LEADERS

Erich asked : « Including family leaders ? »

Gus erased the last word, his answer was : ALL

Father Francis : « What... What do they expect ? Do they really think they can build a society with this ? »

Gus was without opinion.

Erich answered : « What Gus told us, there are webcams. All these evil people in Houma are working for an outside force, who gives them food and security in return. And you know how valuable these turned out to be. They are going to be loyal to these mysterious bastards to the end. »

Gus approved.

Father Francis : « So even if we could remove these evil sodomites from Houma and convert the rest... »

Erich : « There would still be some power, who knows where, whose existence would haunt us. Cantaloupes, you know. Gus has been briefed. »

Everybody remained silent.

To conclude, Erich said : « We can't win over them, but we can survive. If we manage to do this every time, we will prevail. »

Father Francis answered : « Amen to that. »

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A week later, Diane asked Erich at dinner : « Erich, is this always going to be like that ? It feels that nothing is going to happen around here anymore. »

Erich : « If you're talking about a very small town of 400 souls, a small village actually, yes, it's going to remain that way. A few families going out fishing, a workshop always short on materials, a small motley collection of books as a library. »

Diane : « What about my life ? »

Erich : « I tell you what : in about a year, we'll know much more about the rest of the world. Mark went to New Orleans, or so I've been told. They have work gangs there. Perhaps something is going to be restarted. »

Diane : « You think they'll restart the Internet ? Or even just TV ? I can't stand this religious nutjob's FM radio anymore ! If only they would play some music ! »

Erich : « I don't know Diane. Reginald told us he was working on a secure file exchange event. »

Diane : « If only I had uploaded more songs into my smartphone ! But you could just log into sites and stream... Why is this exchange taking so long anyway ? »

Erich : « Reginald is afraid, as I am, that those people who engineered the crisis left some very nasty viruses on the web. Perhaps you caught one of them while streaming. You can't really know this by yourself. He's doing some complicated stuff, and he doesn't have a lot of hardware to start with, and he's doing this on his free time. »

Diane pouted, then over played her pouting.

Erich : « If only we can get a few music instruments back, we could be making our own music. »

A spark lit in Diane 's eyes.

Erich : « Oh no. »

Diane : « It's worth trying. »

Erich : « If you're going to rig some music instruments, you do it somewhere else. The Shrimp Insitute or something. »

Diane : « But how will I know if it's well tuned ? Who will tell me if I'm making progress ? »

Erich : « Not me, I'm very bad at this stuff. »

In a distance, a very peculiar noise could be heard at a distance. It was only when he heard it that Erich realised how quiet the world had become. It was a moped.

Diane jumped up with joy : « They're restarting it ! They're restarting everything ! »



Erich watched the moped as it advanced cautiously over the dusty road.

On his mattress, Gus was still in pain. He caught a nasty fever, probably from repeatedly bathing in the canal with his rectal problem. Two days ago, Erich and Diane were extremely worried about him, but now that the worst was over, everybody became more relaxed about it. The only words Gus said in the last week was when, in horrible pain, he grabbed Erich by the collar and yelled an order to his face : « Protect my son ! »

As Erich anticipated, the moped stopped in front of the library.

Diane : « I wonder who that might be. »

Erich : « Jonesy sent someone for me. He's the only one who can afford a moped and gasoline. »

Diane : « I wonder what kind of emergency it is that only you can handle here and now. »

Erich : « Diane, during the financial crisis, people chartered private jets just to see me face to face. The cost of the flights exceeded the value of my house back then. The only emergency right now is his money. »

The driver was the barman Erich had met before.

The barman : « I'm sorry Sir, about last week. I didn't know who you were. When I told Jonesy, he was not too happy you left like that. »

Erich : « That's perfectly okay, we weren't exactly dressed for the occasion back then. Call me Erich. What seems to be the trouble ? »

Barman : « I'm Carl. Jonesy has issues with people contesting his claims. They cheat on the parcel's dimensions, and won't negotiate with him. »

Erich sighed : « I have to reinvent agriculture bit by bit. You'll see that one day they'll get me, just like that, with a car or something, to design them a pyramid. »

Diane snickered : « Kathryn told me you were into this stuff. The first thing you did when you were all alone on your island. Nasty,nasty. »

Carl was impressed : « You had your own island ? What happened ? »

Erich : « They sent a killer team and a drone. They bombed it twice. »

Carl opened his eyes wide : « And I thought my story was badass enough. »

Gus had to move into Erich's room, to make way for an extensive encyclopedia research. Erich made Carl look for cadastre methods, Diane for the dioptra and Erich himself had to dwell into dreaded geometry and trigonometry calculations.

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At about one past midnight, they all went to bed. Erich woke Carl up in the early morning, gave him a pen marker and then presented him his back.

Erich : « We have no paper left. Draw the dioptra you see in the encyclopedia on my back. Make it very large and detailed. »

Diane woke up, intrigued by the activity, and sneaked into the main room.

She witnessed a real work of art on Erich's back.

Diane : « You sure have an artistic touch, Carl. »

Carl : « I sure hope so, I had my own tattoo parlour, and won the Southern Prize four years ago. »

Erich : « That's why it was taking so long. Also, now I get why you wanted to leave Houma. »

Carl : « Don't even talk about it. »

Diane : « What are you going to do ? »

Erich ; « Once he's done, I'll write the mathematical methods on my thighs and legs, then I supposed I'll have to ride the moped all the way to Water Wells. »

Carl : « That's the plan. I'll take the ferry. »

Diane laughed out loud : « Why the trouble ? Take the pictures with your phone ! You'll have the complete page as well. »

Erich had a large smile : « Thank you so much for your offer, Diane. I will take good care of your phone. »

Diane almost shrieked back : « No way. NO WAY. »

Erich : « That's settled. »

Diane : « What about Carl's ? »

Carl : « The Saviour's Soldiers took all our phones and computers. »

Diane : « No way. That's just evil. »

Carl : « Way, girl. You just have no idea. Way... »

Diane : « Why don't we have the dioptra built at our workshop ? »

Erich : « Jonesy is in agony right now. He wants to see me with a plan as soon as possible. When he'll see the dioptra being built in front of his eyes, he should be somewhat more relaxed, and thus open to discussion. »

Diane : « Kathryn would certainly like me to remind you about your... discussion skills. »

Erich : « We'll find an agreement. »

Diane : « Make him bleed ! »

Erich : « You don't build long-term business on making the other bleed. Don't forget Houma has all the equipment and experts he needs. »

Diane : « Why then all this trouble? »

Erich : « Two things : first, he doesn't want to owe them more than necessary. But the real reason is that people will still trust me, whereas they would have absolute zero confidence in people from Houma, even when these would tell them that grass is green. »

An hour later, Erich was ready to leave. Gus, still unable to walk, crawled to the door of his room. Erich went to meet him. Gus handed him the shotgun. Erich made a marked nod as a sign of respect. In a mutual understanding, Gus went back to his room and Erich left in the morning, before the day started to get too hot.

Although the moped often drove near walking speed, driving it was an exhilarating experience. Erich greeted as many people as he could on his way, honking playfully all the way. He witnessed people cleaning the up the road in anticipation of his arrival.

Diane worried about possible ambushes, but this being an unique object, the culprit of such a thing would be immediately known. Besides, there was nowhere else to ride this thing.

Two hours later, Erich found himself in front of the barn in Water Wells. Without breaking any sweat, he entered the wide opened barn, removed his clothes save for his underwear and called for people to draw or take a picture of the diagrams and formulas on his skin.

Jonesy's employees had a good laugh, then walked away in search of pens and papers, not without yelling to the girls to get up and see a man strip.

Indeed a small dozen of prostitutes, from all ages and shapes, including a strangely obese woman from Houma, a muscular man and a teenager, gathered in the barn with sleepy eyes. The young prostitute he saw the other night was among them. They first erupted in nasty laughter, then without instructions walked to the garden chairs and sat down exactly like patrons used to.

There was mean-spirited tension mingled with good-spirited humour, an uneasy mix. The employees brought a camcorder on a tripod from one of the largest prostitute cabin, and filmed Erich's body with it.

The girls spouted dirty names, one after the other, a long meticulous list of everything they had to hear during these sad nights. Some insults had a weird religious twist, and gave Erich a foul, bitter taste of the level of frustration and madness that had to exist in Houma.

The filming crew told Erich to slowly turn around so they could film it all. This led the small crowd's hysteria to a higher level.

« Move that body baby ! Come on, don't just fucking stand there ! Work it ! work it ! »

Erich saw the ex-orbited eyes, the twisted mouths. Were they imitating the patrons, or were they just like them ? It was the latter : a revenge on life. This time, for a few minutes, the wheel had turned.

Erich watched them with cautious curiosity. Ill at ease and still slowly turning around, he looked away, towards the price list next to the bar. It reminded him of Gus, and all of a sudden an idea formed in his head.

He touched the side of his very worn and humble underwear. An uproar erupted on the spot. The prostitutes shouted obscenities in anger, not holding still on their chairs.

He encouraged them to shout louder. The sudden uproar was of a nearly physical nature. The filming crew told Erich they had it all, upon which two prostitutes enraged, shouting : « Keep filming ! Keep filming ! »

Erich faced his audience and asked them : « If I take those off, there is a bit of help I would from you afterwards. »

The audience laughed, cheered and mocked : « Sure baby ! I got what you need ! » The obese woman took one of her comparatively small breasts out and massaged them lasciviously.

Erich had a forced smile and said, a bit stiff : « Not that kind of stuff, and not for me. » One of the younger prostitutes stood up and declared : « We'll do your thing. But for that you'll go up there and take everything off, and we'll be filming. Deal ? »

Erich was paralysed by the deal, but kept thinking of Gus' permanent embarrassment. He overcame his disgust and answered : « Deal. »

He reluctantly walked to the stairs to the stage and climbed them one by one. The crowd was turning into beasts. The filming crew was very amused, and various people showed up at the barn's entrance, including that old lady that asked annoying questions, and Jonesy himself. They were all very interested in the unfolding scene.

The crowd called : « Shake it ! Shake it ! »

Erich suddenly felt very vulnerable and disgusted. The grotesque, aggressive attitude of the patrons triggered violent reactions in him. He was against doing them any favour. But he thought of Gus, and how he had to face his own surviving child with his grotesque deformity. There was a cowardly voice inside Erich, telling him that Gus had no other choice, and was accustomed to it. But the memory of his near agony some days before sprang with overwhelming force to his mind. Erich thought of the camera, how this could destroy not only himself, but Kathryn, young Henry, his reputation, his work, his legacy.

Teeth clenched, an angry sneer on his mouth, Erich suddenly took down his underwear.

There was a small gap in the various sounds, then a terrible wave of screams. Erich wasn't listening

to it anymore, it was all like a violent force, just like when he braved the storm on his island. Mentally, he was escaping elsewhere.

A part of him followed the orders from the crowd. He turned slowly around, like he would do in a medical examination. Just like in an old decrepit hospital, he felt cold, exposed. He then felt threatened, as if the walls had treacherous shards. Having his back towards the crowd, he felt even more exposed, unable to assess what what going on.

The crowd would simply not stop. He felt some bile in his mouth, he was in the early stages of throwing up. He thought about about Kathryn, his adult son seeing this in many years, facing general humiliation. The DHS goons using this against him. The DHS dungeon.

He didn't realise the crowd had ceased its cheers. He felt a blanket around him. He realised he had broken out in tears, silently. His body was sobbing. One of the older female prostitutes made his sit down. The other prostitutes walked up the stairs and joined him.

It took him several minutes to come down to his senses. The intrigued crowd outside didn't disperse, it was waiting patiently for the outcome of it all. Jonesy watched patiently, deprived of initiative.

A female prostitute told Erich : « I don't know what it is you're going to ask, but it sure means something to you. »

Erich, his voice still a bit highly pinched from the weeping, spoke clearly : « The DHS tortured a man for months, now he has a gaping anus. He was ashamed to talk to his only remaining son. Three days ago he almost died from an infection he probably caught while washing in the canal. He goes there at least seven times a day. You probably have some of those butt-plugs around here. I'm asking you to lend me some, so he can see which one he needs. »

A weird silence followed. Nobody knew what to say. A male prostitute asked the film crew : « You got that ? »

There was an isolated « yes » from the crew.

Another prostitute told Erich : « Of course we're doing to help you with it, now that you know what it feels like up here. »

Jonesy had a stern look at both the prostitutes and Erich. He didn't want this to degenerate in yet more trouble.

Somebody fetched Erich's clothes. Erich slowly get dressed up again. He recovered gradually from his shock, helped by the prostitutes cheering him up. They eventually went back to their huts, and the crowd dispersed. The camcorder was switched off and put on the bar.

Jonesy had one of his employees fix some very strange-tasting synthetic coffee substitute. Erich needed the warmth of the mixture to regain some of his senses.

Jonesy asked : « Was this really necessary ? You should have asked me first. »

Erich was at a loss for words. Finally, he couldn't find any spiffy one-liners, he genuinely said : « Gus was dying. I only thought about him. He doesn't deserve to die like that. »

Jonesy was miffed : « You're destroying your reputation with this stuff. You're not helping anybody. »

Erich kept silent. He was agreeing with Jonesy, but something deeper told him he did the good thing nonetheless.

The moped could be heard at a distance. It was Matthew, who had been sent for by Jonesy.

Matthew asked Erich and Jonesy some questions, but didn't get clear answers.

Erich said : « Just watch the video. All of it. »

Matthew was moved by what he saw on the camcorder's tiny screen.

Jonesy was becoming increasingly angry at the situation. He asked Matthew : « Well, didn't he made a complete fool of himself ? »

Matthew talked back without any hint of respect for Jonesy : « I know more than a hundred people that would put Erich's life before their own. Because Erich always does the right thing, at the risk of his own life if need be. This is why you sent out for him, and nobody will ever sent out for you. »

Jonesy was clearly losing his self-control, wounded by what Matthew said and how he said it. He mocked Matthew's final phrase : « Ooh, I'm a sinner, nobody will love me, poor me. »

Erich was now fully able to intervene and calm things down, but something kept him from doing so. For the moment, he still felt a little bit like one of Jonesy's sexual workers. It was nice to see the wheel turn around.

Matthew laughed at Jonesy as if he was yet another of those countless children at the Perimeter :

« Erich is very diplomatic, he will never tell you the truth like I will now : if he ever says that you should die, more than a hundred people will follow his order without even asking why. Your closest employees would perhaps be those who'll slit your throat wide open. »

Jonesy's body was tense, ready to slap Matthew or worse.

Erich calmly said : « He's right, you know. »

Both Matthew and Jonesy were uncertain of the side Erich was taking. The uncertainty led to a diffusing of the tension.

Erich got up and went to a garden chair, this time sitting down with great care. The two others were forced to follow. Erich remembered how he hated these seminars about all these silly skills, until he understood that they had a reason to exist : they worked.

Once the others were seated, Erich resumed : « Indeed, many people have come to respect me. After all, Jonesy, this is why you sent out for me, or didn't you ? »

Jonesy was red with anger. With clenched teeth, he threatened : « You idiot, you think you can speak to me like that at my place ? »

Erich got up and declared : « You are right. It was silly of me. I'll go back to Joyeux-Tiburon now, and I'm sure Matthew also has more important things to do. »

Erich and Matthew walked out of the barn at a steady pace. It appeared to Erich that there were more workers around the barn than really necessary. They were very interested in what was going on with their boss, because their livelihood depended on him. If he wasn't up to the task, they had to prepare a plan B of some sort. Actually, in these troubled times, many people had as many plan B as castles in the air, but some events made them activate them.

Jonesy was simultaneously fuming with rage and utterly terrified. For the first time since he founded Water Wells, he felt he was losing control. Worse, he was in need of advice, and the person he needed the most was not only denying him his, but making things markedly worse. Jonesy rose energetically from his chair and walked with a resolute pace to his office.

Sides had been chosen.

## Chapter 75

Matthew and Erich were followed by a dozen people as they walked out of the barn. Then these people looked at each other.

Erich was still shaken from his earlier experience, whereas Matthew was exhilarating. On their way out, they met the teenage prostitute. In her hands, a pillow cover filled with strange objects, obviously the sex toys Erich asked before.

As Erich received her gift, he stuttered : « Thank... thank you. I'll bring the rest back. »  
The teenager answered with a patient smile : « No hurry... »  
She shook hands with Erich as a sign of mutual understanding, then as he headed on his way out, she slapped one of his butt cheeks with as much energy as she could. It was as if the slapping sound could be heard in the entire location. She sported a typically brattish mischievous smile.

Erich was troubled, it was as if he received an unwelcomed business card that wouldn't leave him.

As Erich and Matthew walked on, the older woman hurried to them. She briefly told them : « Spare those who work here. We had no other choice. Please. »  
Erich understood his message to Jonesy had a greater effect than anticipated, and gravely answered : « Yes. »

The old woman seemed relieved from a great burden, she hurried to another, rather random location within Water Walls.

Matthew looked at Erich with admiration, although Erich just had his butt slapped and carried a cloth bag full of sex toys. Erich resumed his way out of Water Wells without a word.

After some long minutes passed, Matthew said : « Erich, that was a great lesson. Masterwork. »  
Erich, visibly troubled, asked : « What do you mean ? It was terrible ! »  
Matthew : « What could you possibly expect more ? You showed him from the start how little he meant to you, humiliated him in front of his employees, who are now ready to switch sides. »  
Erich : « I don't know what you're talking about, Matthew. I didn't want this to happen at all. »

Matthew stopped right in his track : « Wait, you were honestly asking his employees for these sex toys ? »

Erich : « Matthew, in case you didn't notice, I am not into stripping inside a brothel. »

Matthew laughed out loud.

Erich was preoccupied : « I have the feeling I got away quite well. It could have been a disaster. »

Matthew and Erich resumed their walk. Matthew was thinking things over, then declared : « Erich, the Program sold Jonesy all the sex toys we could find. Jim asked a high price for them. »  
Erich realised how much he humiliated Jonesy but taking directly from his employees the things he sold to him in the first place.

Erich : « No wonder he was pissed. Matthew, you have to tell me those things. »

Matthew : « I know, but then it'll take me the same time it took for all these little deals and things to happen. »

Erich observed Matthew and said : « You don't seem preoccupied with any of this. »

Matthew : « I was delighted. Nobody likes that pimp, you know. I thought that since you were smearing shit on his face, I was also allowed to show him how little he meant to me. That felt

good. »

Erich : « All I wanted was to make myself useful to him, so we could regain some kind of influence on the other farms. »

Matthew : « Nobody will gain influence on those farms, Erich. They're more resilient than people think, and there is a strong power structure there. They're all mean and tough one to another, but in the end they make it work. Especially now that the most problematic people were sent to Houma. »

Erich remained silent, and mulled things over.

Erich : « Then perhaps it's just as well if Houma does the cadastre thing there. »

Matthew turned very serious : « Erich, we have very little spare capacity, if any. We can't afford to divert our efforts into small stuff. »

Erich : « Look at me. My life once again revolves around very small stuff. Three days ago I exchanged a large bunch of radishes, lots of hard work, for pieces of shredded table linen, so I could widen my gardening blouse. And the old lady was still pissed that these shreds went away from her. »

Matthew had a look of intense pity that he couldn't hide. Erich felt uneasy and this stopped the conversation.

They arrived at the Administration, where Jim and the two civil servants were busy structuring the way to handle the information they had.

Erich and Matthew involved themselves in the conversation, and by the end of the morning they had a robust system worked out.

The civil servants kept working on it during lunch, while the men went out for a walk. The sun was shining very brightly, and so they went to the compound to get themselves large and thick straw hats from some sort of depot system.

Jim explained : « One of our farms makes these during the day. It's a popular export product. Those who work the land each have their own hats, and the other people share this pile of botched ones, right here, when we have to. We bring them back at the end of the day. »

Matthew : « I used to set up their workshop. They're at the end of the learning curve, and they don't make botched ones anymore. »

Erich : « What about lice ? »

Jim and Matthew looked at each other. Jim said : « We had had lice one, three weeks ago. We had to burn the shared hats, and of course, it was head shaving and the steam hut for all concerned. I know what you're going to say, Erich, if we add the number of those we burned to those we use right now, there would be more than one for each. »

Erich : « I was going to say that. »

Jim : « These hats are popular in the community gardens of Houma. We can't produce enough of them. We're ready to have none for ourselves rather than interrupt the deliveries. »

Erich nodded, but his face betrayed some disappointment.

Matthew understood : « We need supplies from Houma, Erich. We are actually richer than the average guys in Houma, having enough soles and tires to make sandals, enough thread, needles and buttons to last us years. But some children need glasses, Jim needs bits of cardboard and paper, and hundreds of other items. »

Erich : « As long as the leaders don't indulge in prestige objects, I'm good with that. »

Jim sighed : « A new generation has taken over, Erich. We don't have much to say around here anymore. »

Matthew : « They wanted manual looms, Erich. Like in some third-world village. In my spare time I

work on turning a truck engine into a steam machine with solar preheating. It took me days to explain to them that we wouldn't have enough fibers until at least one year to being a local textile production. As a compromise, I now work on a steam-powered loom. »

The three men walked north, left the Perimeter and reached what used to be a small wood. Nearly all trees had been cut down or even uprooted during the CCC crisis. All that was left was a savannah-like landscape of young trees, small bushes and an full invasion of weeds and grass. The men searched for a spot with enough shadow for a prolonged conversation, but had to settle with a disappointing little tree.

Jim asked : « So , Erich, what do you think about the situation with Jonesy ? »

Erich : « He's not even on a small branch-manager level, but he worked hard to get there. I think he just envisioned to run a small pub with a little brewery and three prostitutes, but there is much demand for that stuff from Houma, and thus Water Wells grew out of proportion. I think that characters like that barman are actually making that place work. »

Matthew : « I think you're right, but why was he in such a hurry about claiming his due ? We have more than a month until we harvest it. »

Erich : « Well, first it does take several weeks to prepare the tools and take the measures. But indeed I suspect something else. »

Jim and Matthew simultaneously came closer to Erich, then looked at each other and laughed.

Erich joined them, then resumed : « I think the pressure comes from Houma. They're setting up some kind of alternate structure out of the city, like this cavalry unit. »

Matthew : « You mean, the two horses that fit on a single pontoon boat... »

Erich : « It's just a start. Perhaps they don't need much of this. After all, in operations, you have to feed the horses grain, and this is not in large supply anyway. »

Erich paused, to collect his thoughts, and resumed : « I think some organisation in Houma is not interested by the harvest, but by the land itself. Perhaps they'd like to relocate some people on functioning farms. We all know how hard it is to jump-start agriculture on abandoned land. »

Jim : « But there would be a conflict, surely. »

Erich : « That's what I was telling myself. I'm making this on the fly, by the way. Perhaps what they want is to gather skills, in order to spread them on their own people afterwards. While they're here, they would gather enough intel on those farms to know how to invade them or control them when the time has come. »

Jim : « That's possible, but what if this is just what you would do ? Perhaps their plan is different. »

Erich : « I'm just elaborating on what they already did in Houma, and what they were planning to do in Joyeux-Tiburon. »

Jim eyes widened : « My God, you're right ! And they would need Jonesy to get the foot in the door. »

Matthew was clearly upset : « This is what we should have discussing weeks ago. The emergency never ended ! Fuck our cottage industry. We're busy making hats and daydream about a textile industry. More spoils for the victor, if you ask me. »

Erich had a contrived expression : « I know, Matthew, but truth is, be barely made it out alive. The storm destroyed our own plan for survival. »

Jim joined in : « Our own plan wouldn't have survived much longer, Matthew. There are thousands of people there, wicked people. You know, those dildos and whips and stuff we traded with Jonesy ? Our salvage teams were glad they were gone. Our people have grown tired of seeing boobs and tits, on and on, on TV and everywhere. There is nothing more pathetic than these flabby latex dicks that smell like car tires. We have no use for them, but those self-righteous religious loonies in Houma ?



They can't get enough of them, now that their government has deprived them of it inside the city limits. »

Matthew was unsure of what Jim meant.

Jim explained : « These are sick people, Matthew. They kill for their own pleasure. Even if we managed to stay alive, they would eventually corrupt us and enslave us. Everything outside Houma would be a huge Water Wells, our kids becoming slaves and prostitutes for them. »

Erich sensed that Jim wasn't finished, and so he didn't intervene.

Jim, carried away by the conversation, almost shouted : « You know our leaders ? They're becoming just like that Jonesy guy. What a example they had, when Philip took over ! At one moment I thought they'd have Erich killed, by drowning or something. »

Jim turned to Erich : « And you, Erich, what did you teach them afterwards ? They didn't change a bit, all they did was replacing the old boss with new bosses. Why do you think Diane wanted to leave this place ? »

Erich had a sad, humble, almost guilty expression : « What was I supposed to do ? They had problems, I advised them. I told them to set their own objectives. This is how leaders start to lead. »

Jim went on, feeding on his own anger : « This is not Harvard, Erich, and this is not the Fifties. If their objective is shitty, we all die next spring, or in two months, for that matter. Do you understand this ? »

Erich was himself getting angry : « I almost died, Jim. Henry died. You're not the youngest. These kids have to learn to get by on their own ! »

Jim : « Yes, Erich, when we're gone. But we're not gone yet, it is our duty to manage the Program while we can. »

Jim didn't realise he was now shouting : « This isn't a training course, for crying out loud ! »

Erich shouted in return : « They all went with Philip ! They were hungry and greedy, and I was delirious with fever ! »

Jim and Erich were facing each other, their bodies tense with anger.

Matthew flatly interrupted : « You've all been played by Roger. »

He stood up in a hurry and walked briskly away, with a face expressing repressed anger.

He announced flatly : « Going to take a dump »

Then he stumbled into something or rather somebody. He grabbed a well-tanned pre-teen boy, wearing nothing but an improvised smock made of hessian, like two sides of a bag sewn together, upon which he had rigged an elaborate camouflage using local vegetation.

The boy violently kicked Matthew, but was soon overwhelmed by Erich and Jim.

After less than a minute of struggle, Jim let his grip loose and said : « Take it easy. It's one of these strigoi-hunters. »

Erich hesitated to let the boy loose : he was fascinated by the animal traits of the boy's elongated face. It reminded him of a long forgotten ghost, Black Pat. The boy's eyes had the same sort of animal intensity.

Finally Erich released his grip as well, and said : « I think you heard everything we said. »

The boy remained silent.

Jim told Erich : « Their vocabulary is not very elaborate, Erich. »

Jim turned to the boy and said : « No offence, kid. »

The boy's body was coiled as a feline ready to jump away. He observed them with caution.

Erich said to the others : « As far as I'm concerned, he can leave. We said nothing but the truth. »

The others agreed.

The boy's body relaxed, and his face took an arrogant attitude. He wanted to talk to the adults, like an adult.

The strigoï-hunter spoke : « Farmers, they are prey for strigoï. Not moving. »

Jim had to agree, reluctantly.

The hunter made an encompassing gesture with his arm : « For everybody, you are prey. »

Erich was fascinated by this western boy, that somehow became some sort of bushman.

The young hunter went on : « You don't move, Houma catches you too. »

Then he mimicked, very realistically, the strangling of a person much smaller than him. The determination in his gesture was powerful.

Erich nodded and bowed slightly in appreciation of the advice. The young hunter appreciated the body communication. He expressed much with his body, his words were akin to written cards in those old silent movie.

The boy concluded : « With danger, talk not, go away. »

And to punctuate his phrase, and end the discussion, he walked away from them without hesitation.

Erich said to the others, knowing the boy was still able to listen : « The boy is right, you know. »

Jim stopped short of rolling his eyes : « This is just some local folklore, Erich. This is not a sign from above or something. »

Erich : « Think about what we were talking about, Jim. The boy understood the situation in his own terms. You said it yourself, if we stay here, our children will become Houma's slaves and prostitutes. »

Jim : « Yeah, and you said that it was up to them to magically avoid that by making all the mistakes until they finally realise that slavery is real and sucks. »

Erich didn't know what to answer.

Jim cautiously said : « I'm going to hit under the belly now Erich, and I'm sorry, and Matthew there is a lesson in this for you too. Erich, you're not the kind of guy that is going to seduce a girl. The girls chose you, and you let them. This is why Kathryn is pissed at you, you don't want to ruffle her feathers and take the lead. She wants you to give her orders, because she needs them, although she doesn't like your orders and she doesn't like needing them. »

For Erich, that was indeed a blow in the stomach. He had not been told this since his early adulthood, and that kind of talk always annoyed him. It annoyed him because it was true, and there was nothing he could do to change this. He was just not up to the task on these issues. Memories of his first marriage came to mind, then memories of his relationship with Kathryn.

Erich was reeling from the blow. Jim observed him like a boxing trainer watching his champion. Matthew was himself upset by Jim's statement, because it was relevant for him as well.

For Erich, it had been a wake-up call. Matthew, still young, didn't want to indulge in that kind of introspection.

He asked Jim : « What should Erich have done ? Kill Philip on the spot ? »

Jim : « By then it was too late. »

Matthew : « But Erich had to be a diplomat. He had to make those people in town work together. »

Jim : « No, Matthew, he had to order Philip to do that dirty job. Erich is the guy who knows what has to be done, but he doesn't know how to do it. But people like Philip don't like that part of the job, and so they do their own thing, hoping they can avoid the truly sucky part that Erich insisted

on. »

Jim paused to let it all sink in, and to take a more aggressive tone : « Philip, the leaders, and even Roger, they're just like children. They don't grasp the big picture. They have to be given orders. »

Erich calmly, almost meekly answered : « You're right about me, Jim. You've understood this much better than I. But that longing for power, I don't have it. I don't want power. »

Jim : « Back in the Map Room, you had power. You gave everybody orders, and you were obeyed. You had three people hanged on the spot, including two boys, with 1% of the words we just used now. »

Erich : « There was a context. People had to obey me. I had to give out orders. It was self-evident, back then. Now people sense no urgency. Even we are not clear about the threats we face. What am I supposed to do ? Colonize their minds ? Call out another War of Terror ? Scare people with stories of bombs in diapers ? We don't have mass media anymore, Jim, and our priests run their own agenda. »

It was Jim's turn to accept the argument.

The silence that followed was almost welcome. The sun had tilted to the side now, and while it was still the middle of the afternoon, all three anticipated the evening chores to come.

Matthew declared : « We can't do anything without resources anyway. The three of us have to practically beg for our food, that's what it is. I don't think anybody will let Erich dictate them anything about this anymore. Within the Perimeter as well as in the other farms. »

Erich : « On that field, Houma has the resources, the numbers, the skulduggery. Nothing we can do but symbolic resistance. The strigoï-hunter was right. »

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Later, at the dinner service at the compound, some proof was added when servicing personnel looked at Erich with disdain. To them, he was like a tourist, coming and going without doing any work, but still eating their hard-earned food.

The rumours about him indulging about some very unnecessary belly dancing, for completely obscure reasons, reinforced the hostility.

For Jim, Matthew and Erich, it was a humbling experience. Once they ate their bowl of polenta with fried green beans, they walked out in the evening, still somewhat hungry.

Erich took a deep breath.

Jim asked : « So, that was it for us, then ? »

Erich said : « Probably, yes. But a man's always goes back to what he does best. »

Jim : « What are you going to do, then ? Analysing stuff you're not going to change anyway ? »

Erich had a slick, self-confident smile : « No Jim, I'm going to do what I was doing when you first met me. I'm going out of dodge. »

Jim scoffed, but with glittering eyes : « Well blow me down ! Erich, the survivalist that is going to survive survivalism ! Just for the sake of it ! »

Erich : « If the situation sucks, and we can't change it, why bother fighting ? I have memories of before, of that strange community in Emerett. I think they got wiped out pretty early in the crisis. »

Jim : « Pitted against those Brazilians, at the Edge of Space, my money would have gone to the Brazilian Team. »

Erich : « Exactly. So why not prepare the next exit as early as possible ? »

Matthew : « You can't spend your life running away, Erich ! »

Erich turned to Matthew, intoxicated by a new hope : « Matthew, I'm only here talking to you because I did just that. You never actually left this place, but I managed to escape Chicago. »

Jim hopped on that train : « He saved Kathryn and me in the process, and he saved Glenn too. »

Matthew felt uneasy : « This was Chicago. Everybody knew these mega cities were unsustainable. »

Jim : « No, we didn't. I was planning to spend the evening of my life there. It became only evident during the CCC crisis, but by then they had become inescapable. Erich couldn't have afforded the expense of moving even just his own body here. »

Erich insisted : « Matthew, you know how important timing is in a project. »

Matthew shook his head : « Sorry, I know what you want to say, but this is rural Louisiana, not the Chicago suburbs. »

Jim took Matthew and turned him to face the direction to Houma.

With an exalted voice, he said : « Look up, Matthew. Thousands of bitter, hungry, frustrated assholes within a day's walk from us. This is Chicago all over again. »

Matthew bit his lips. They knew Jim was right, but still, something was amiss.

Then he put the finger on it : « This is rich ! You want to escape what you've set up for us ! This is all your work, your decisions ! But now you don't like it, and, just like that, you'll abandon us when the going gets rough ! Fucking great ! »

Erich answered immediately : « We saved as much people as we could, Matthew. You will never know how many lives your... Fish Factory has saved, but you know you made a difference for hundreds of people. Hundreds. Now people go on with their lives. Just because we saved them doesn't mean we own them. »

Matthew : « Do you realise how betrayed we will feel when the trouble begins ? When Jim will be caught escaping with that Chink bitch on a tiny boat. »

Jim winked an eye : « Hey, watch it buddy, you're talking about my wife here ! But I understand what you're saying. »

Erich : « Perhaps by then we'll come up with some sort of emergency plan. Again. »

Matthew : « To save a tiny bit of the population. Again. »

Erich : « Perhaps. Or not. Look, it's always the same old story, it's only when you broke something you realise how wrong you are. With the looming menace, those leaders will realise they help me, and you, again. If we have contingency plans and gear ready, we can achieve a lot. All we need for those is a bit of time and as much information as possible. About everything. »

Erich turned to Jim : « Jim, if you can set up a workable inventory of the Perimeter, we can work out lists for an evacuation. Individual bags, collective equipment, critical equipment. »

Matthew was excited : « There ! You see, you did come up with something. »

Erich : « There is another thing in our plan we're going to repeat as well. The Other Farms, and Water Wells, are going to be our buffer. Just like in Joyeux-Tiburon. »

Matthew : « I can see these people will have to exterminate the local Saviour's Soldiers – again. »

Erich : « Well, same problems, same solutions, you know ? »

Matthew : « Very nice, but we are not going to evacuate enough grain to start all over again. »

Erich : « Maybe the Perimeter can turn some boats we salvaged into floating granaries... But we'll have to live off the land, and the sea, for a while. »

Jim : « Erich, why not set up Joyeux-Tiburon as a fallback position ? »

Erich : « Because then we'll be fixated again, and we know that Houma can't feed its masses on the

Perimeter alone. They will hunt us down. The Bayou is a good fallback position. »

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Erich arrived at Joyux-Tiburon the next day. He was surprised to see that rumours about his stripping on his day before already preceded him.

Gus and Diane were sorry for this and welcomed him warmly : he was to feel himself at home. Gus was very grateful for Erich's gift, and deeply appreciative for the price Erich had to pay. Later that evening, he wrote in a clay tablet he had rigged from a poster frame : « HE COULD HAVE GIVEN ME 1 », referring to Jonesy on the day of his arrival from Houma.

Gus was getting accustomed to working the garden. Erich had brought a large bail of straw from the Perimeter, and tried to thatch hats from it, as an additional source of income. He realised how low he had fallen economically, supplying inferior hats to the makers of finer hats. It turned out he was not good at it, so he offered older townspeople to take the the bail home and give it a try.

The workshop in Joyeux-Tiburon was engaging in another, much more promising venture. On a razed location half a mile away from the library, they managed to build a pottery oven running on biogas, and using the excellent south Louisiana clay, proceeded to make standardised clay pots.

The prototypes were already very close to production value. The library was a given such a prototype for internal use, and Erich could admire the very professional, high-temperature salt glazing that reminded him of his village in Germany, where ancient bottles and stoneware were frequently found in the corners of barns and attics.

Gus developed an interest for the production, and in about a week later he became the town's potter, while the workshop crew moved on to other projects. The pottery oven was also cooking meals and bread for the whole downtown area, in exchange for the transport of clay and salt, or other services.

It took another two weeks for Gus and some helpers to concentrate the biggest bioreactor elements available in town in order to create a bioreactor battery up to the task. The installation concentrated the human waste and other sources of biomass from the area.

The pottery oven churned out twelve standardised, cylindric half-gallon canning jars per day, including on Sundays, with few rejects ; that was all that the energy from the bioreactors could heat in a day. The production was entirely for export to the Perimeter, who had vastly superior demand than this meagre supply, but didn't want to import too much from Houma. In exchange, the Perimeter paid primarily with sunflower and maize seeds.

This very modest cottage industry was the decisive addition that created a sort of community service in the downtown area. Everybody worked for free at his own pace and if it suited him. People were astonishingly productive when not coerced into work. Community work was also a distraction from boredom.

Downtown Joyeux-Tiburon gradually became a cosy place, free of rubble and dirt, with modest but elegant beds of local flowers and herbs. Its low population density prevented the area of becoming oppressive, while providing a sense of civilisation in a town surrounded by an immense open space.

Erich, now completely forgotten by the Perimeter leaders, tried to find his place into this small community, but like so many others, felt like a non-fitting piece in a jigsaw puzzle.

Erich often considered that it was the practical lack of any alcohol, tobacco or drugs that prevented

many people of indulging in creeping self-destruction.

Still, life was good again, in a quiet way. Out of nowhere came a tradition of cooking a common meal in the pottery oven on Saturday evenings. Tables were gathered in the area's center area, where locals and invited people from further away sat together, talked and laughed. Fights were rare and had always some theatricality in them.

With the help of the workshop and some idle townspeople, Diane managed to fix up a Glockenspiel. An old woman travelled two miles from further north only to teach Diane one hour per day, in exchange of a good meal. On Saturdays, Diane would play some easy pieces of music on it, always finishing with a song where everybody could join. It usually was a musical disaster, on all parts, but it didn't matter.

Robert and Erich once invited Sue and Kathryn to join, while some volunteers watched over Three-Acorns. Instead of bringing the couples together, the evening actually made them drift further apart because it was obvious the two men were integrated into this community and their wives were not, and thus the experience was not renewed.

While it was common for townspeople to have lost some inhibitions, if not most, there was a good spirit in that people often came at peace with their inner demons, and helped others to get rid of theirs. A sign of this relaxed atmosphere was the complete acceptance of the very few homosexual couples or ménage à trois situations.

Kathryn could evidently see that Diane was still an innocent girl in spite of her age, to which Erich was something akin to extended family, a protective uncle. Gus, now living under a glorified hut close to the oven, was also acting as a protective family figure to her : it would be difficult for a young man to submit Diane to temptation. As a matter of fact, it appeared the Kathryn that in the previous civilisation, Diane would already have been submitted to a constant barrage of messages and attitudes that would have destroyed her innocence by now, if not her good nature.

It was also Kathryn who wondered why the dining tables, often made up from salvaged doors and plywood sheets, were presenting traces of repeated cutting with a knife and considerable staining by blood. Tellingly, the townspeople realised they had lived so long with what they retrieved from the Fish Factory that they came to forget where these traces came from. There was an embarrassed laughter at the table, and then people passed dishes of tortillas and baked beans around just for the sake of it.