Mystery and the Kingdom

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1. The Birth

Twenty years ago there was a plague. Officially it was called the Red Plague. The people however referred to it as “the plague that killed our mothers.” They couldn’t figure out why, but illness seemed to spread only among women, particularly those over thirty. It began with an acquisition of a red cell, which most believed was transmitted airborne although some would say otherwise. Not long after the red cell rooted itself in the body, degenerative signs would start to appear. First, shortness of breath; followed by fatigue and nausea; then, loss of sight and hearing, and finally failure of vital organs. One might have imagined that having one’s organs fail is the worst form of punishment, but that didn’t prove to be so. In fact it was the loss of sight and hearing that was most painful. The illness moved very rapidly, rarely going beyond two weeks; many of the infected were simply not ready to lose connection with the world so quickly. And despite seeing their families on many occasions while in hospital, they were never quite able to make that last goodbye despite the knowledge of certain death that they were facing; there was always one more day, one more visit, one more chance to say goodbye, until nearly overnight, hearing and sight disappeared, and only a numb feeling of touch remained. It was at the moment when they were touching their loved ones that the terrible thoughts started to rush in the minds of the ill about the things they should have said, but did not. And then they were gone.

That was twenty years ago. It took two years to get control of the plague, but by then the female population was already reduced to a quarter of what it was. Millions were lost. In the aftermath, families were left broken and the grief over a loss was shared by
everyone. The generation of depression was born. Only young girls with rosy faces remained. That was twenty years ago and the reason why the red cell disease affected only women remains a mystery. It was then, and even more so now, the world of men.
2. City Dwellers

“Beware of emptiness” his mother always told him. Ymir wasn’t sure what that meant. He never bothered to ask. He wasn’t sure why, simple lack of interest perhaps.

The steam whistle blew in the factory. Everybody stopped what they were doing and in a rehearsed synchronization turned away from their tools and machines to head toward the exit. It was a matter of routine; to some of the older workers it was practically a natural instinct by now.

A surge of workers poured out of the gates, men, all of them. While they were leaving, another line of workers was filling the factory for the night shift. As the two lines moved past each other, smiles and grins on one side were greeted with weary looks and obscene hand gestures from the other.

Ymir was somewhere in the jovial line of people, thinking as usual about how he will not work another day in that factory. He couldn’t imagine how the night shift worked in that place. It was dark in there as it was, and at night? That’s what emptiness was, Ymir thought, total darkness.

Olaf appeared next to Ymir and wrapped his fat arm around his shoulders.

“See you tomorrow, yes?” Olaf said.

“I’m not coming back” Ymir said.

Olaf laughed, “You say that every time we leave this place. What are you going to do? Hang out with those street-rats friends of yours?”

Ymir didn’t say anything and pulled himself away from Olaf who gave no effort to hold him back.
“Where are you going?” he said.

Ymir moved away from the line. All the workers headed towards the city, most of whom, if not all of them, would take the tram back home, to their dark apartments located somewhere in the tall and grey buildings, which would be surrounded by other identical buildings, where their existence will be completely hidden from the world, unless someone tried very hard to find them.

Ymir glanced back at Olaf and watched him move along the line of exhausted workers. Olaf was looking back at him. “I will see you tomorrow!” he yelled and looked away, as though he was laying the subject to rest. Ymir again responded with silence.

The temperature began to drop as the night arrived. Ymir tightened his jacket and started going towards the canal, where some of the familiar street-rats no doubt skulked. Not something he was particularly excited about doing, but still, it was better than going home. Anything was better than going home.

In the distance there was a line of gigantic cylindrical towers. Black smoke, darker than the night sky, billowed from their mouths. Nobody noticed them anymore, nobody who lived in or near the city at least. They were a natural part of the environment, just as the moon hung in the sky, or just as a stray cat lingered around a dumpster, it was a view that everyone accepted.

At the bottom of the alley, Ymir saw the canal going far into the distance, cutting straight through the large industrial city center of Bela-Tarr. But Ymir was still far away from the center, and on his side the only source of light was an occasional lamp post;
some of them had light bulbs that flickered weakly or were dead altogether. Ymir took a small running start and jumped on top of the ledge which overlooked the cold water of the canal. Ymir spread his arms for balance and started to carefully move along the ledge. He lost balance occasionally and would tilt to the right or left before regaining the proper form. Watching his dark silhouette sway might have given someone an impression that he was dancing, like a fairy or a demon from some old fable. An unexpected gust of cold wind almost blew Ymir off the ledge, but he managed to hold on. He hastily jumped off the ledge onto the sidewalk. “Emptiness,” he thought, “it was an endless depth of deep waters, where a person could spend his entire life swimming through it, and in the end come no closer to the bottom than when one started.”

Ymir reached a familiar little bridge crossing over the canal. He descended the narrow wet steps to the water level to see if anyone was under it. It was a dark place, moldy, dirty…but local kids liked it because it was secluded. One kid in particular liked this spot. Looking under the bridge, Ymir saw a body sitting against the wall, holding a small bag to the face, inflating and deflating it with a steady rhythm. Ymir didn’t have to guess who it was. There was something about that small frame, which was equipped with skinny arms and a distinctly large nose that for inexplicable reasons always reminded Ymir of cats and there was only one person who reminded Ymir of cats. Ymir went over and stood over him. The individual didn’t seem to notice Ymir and continued breathing into small cellophane bag.

“Cat” Ymir said.
No response.

“Cat!” Ymir yelled.

The person put down the bag and looked at Ymir with a confused look.

“What are you doing here alone?” Ymir said.

“Waiting for you, oh no, what time is it?”

“Time? I don’t know, close to midnight.”

“Shit!” Cat said suddenly coming to life, “quick, we got to run to the Iron Mill.”

“Why?”

“Because we must, let’s go” Cat said. He grabbed a hold of Ymir’s arm and rushed him out from under the bridge and up the narrow wet steps, on which Cat tripped twice. Once on the sidewalk, the two youths started running, or at least attempted to, because Cat did not so much run as he jogged forward in a maniacally zigzag pattern with shoulders bent forward, while Ymir half-heartedly trotted behind.

“Come on!” Cat screamed at his friend lagging behind.

Ymir picked up his speed a bit.

“Why did you get here so late?” Cat said.

“I didn’t know you were waiting for me.”

“By the way, you will have to skip your work for next couple days” Cat said.

“Says who?”

“Says me, for once we will have some proper fun” Cat said to Ymir with a grin that always looked devious and sly.
The Iron Mill was a name of an old bar located on the east side of Bela-Tarr. The bar was once an old mill, but was turned into a local spot that sold cheap liquor to anyone who was willing to pay. Ymir and Cat were still running through the streets. Not long after, Cat became exhausted and started to walk.

“So are you going to tell me why I will lose my job?” Ymir asked.

“Why do you care?” Cat said after taking a deep breath.

“I need to make some money; you know if you ever got a job, I think you wouldn’t mind it so much.”

“A job? Why in the world would I get a job? My little knife earns me more in a day than you do in a week” Cat said and then took another deep breath to catch up for all the air he used up.

“But one day you will meet someone who will not be impressed with your little pocket knife.”

“When I do, then I will think about it” he said.

“Then it will be too late.”

Cat stopped walking and turned around and looked straight in Ymir’s face.

“What?” Ymir asked.

“You’re gonna start telling me again what shit I should or shouldn’t do” Cat said. “Damn it, just a minute ago I was excited about spending some time with my friend, and now all I feel like doing is stabbing you and letting you bleed on this sidewalk.”

“You want to stab me?”

“Yes. Yes I do” Cat said.
“Well don’t!”

“Well stop pestering me! I know my shit, you know yours, let’s keep it at that.”

Cat then walked ahead of Ymir, always keeping a small distance between them. Ymir knew Cat’s short temper well. Cat would get over it; he always did. Cold air blew through the streets of Bela-Tarr and Ymir and Cat shivered in their old sports jackets; their hands were deep inside their pockets and their heads retracted into their small neck covers. Cat again stopped walking. Ymir was looking down at the sidewalk for so long that he didn’t even notice that they were standing in front of a blue neon sign attached to an old brick building. The sign read, “Iron Mill - Traditional Bar”

“Traditional shit” Cat said. Ymir nodded. Another gust of wind blew by and the two young men shivered in their clothes.

Instead of going into the bar, Cat lead Ymir into the alley next to it. On the brick walls there were old propaganda posters issued by the government. Many of them were scratched beyond recognition, but some were still identifiable. One showed a picture of a young boy looking proudly at the passing-by soldiers, there was a caption written at the bottom but it was torn off, only letters R and P were visible. Another poster showed a large wave of fire with an angry face looming over the city, the caption read “Help stop the plague, wash your hands!” At the end of the alley, Cat and Ymir saw two people sitting on the ground with their arms wrapped around their knees.

“Who’s that?” Ymir asked.

“Aisa” Cat said.
Ymir grabbed a hold of Cat’s shoulder and spun him around, “Cat, why do we want to be around Aisa? No, tell me what *are* we doing?” Ymir said.

“Or what? You’re gonna go home?” Cat said.

Ymir didn’t say anything.

“You are not going home. You don’t have a home.”

Ymir continued staring seriously at Cat.

“Okay look” Cat said, “we’re going outside the city for a night, or two.”

“Why?”

“Aisa, she is part of some group called The Last Cause, I don’t know what they’re all about, but apparently they have little organizations established in other cities too.”

Ymir listened to Cat, waiting to hear something of relevance.

“Well, they are all having some kind of a mass meeting in the Ash forest. Aisa said their leader will speak.”

“They have a leader?” Ymir asked.

“I know, who would have thought that in this day and age there is a group that is that well organized. Anyway, I guess it’s supposed to be a real big deal and Aisa is the only member of The Last Cause that I know; she said we can come and tag along” Cat said with a smile.

“Yes, but what’s the point of risking going outside the city?”

“What’s the point?” Cat said shocked, “Ymir, what else is there to do?! Come on, it will be an adventure. Look, these guys are willing to take an incredible risk to gather a
mass of people outside the city. This has to be something important, something big.

Besides, I need money.”

Ymir chuckled, not because it was funny, but because he felt foolish for thinking that there was some alternative motive to Cat’s desire to go to the gathering. Ymir said “What did Aisa say their group is all about?”

“I don’t know, she didn’t seem to know anything. I think she only became a member inadvertently through her drug dealer.”

Ymir sighed and said “Who is driving us there?”

“I don’t know. That’s why we are here. Some guy who has directions is supposed to pick us up” Cat said.

“Well does he have a permit to go outside the city?” Ymir asked.

“I don’t know Ymir, my guess would be no, but he’s apparently supposed to know how to pass check points and stuff.”

“Caaaat…” Ymir pleaded, and then started laughing uncontrollably, “why, why would you ever think that this would be in any way fun? Sounds like nothing but a dumb risk to get arrested. Why do you want to risk going back to detention camp?”

“Because I don’t care Ymir. Do you know what that means not to care? Fuck you, go home” Cat said and started heading toward Aisa at the other end of the alley.

It was a dumb idea; dumb idea for dumb people, Ymir thought. But his life was filled with an excruciatingly dull routine of work and sleep. Moreover, violent rage was brewing inside of him due to his inability to find different work over these past months. He felt as though he had to do something daring, anything to break up the current course
of his life. Ymir thought about Olaf; he imagined his jolly round face, “See you tomorrow” it said. A worker, Ymir thought, worker the day he was born, and he will be a worker till the day he dies. “See you tomorrow” Olaf’s face said again. Not this time, thought Ymir. Feeling guilty and free, Ymir followed Cat.

Cat and Ymir walked up to Aisa at the end of the alleyway. She was looking at the street road not far away. Another young man with green spiked hair was sitting next to Aisa smoking a cigarette. Aisa noticed Cat, and then she saw Ymir and gave him a look that obviously meant he was not welcome. For a long time Ymir suspected that Aisa had some form of mental condition, because a person who at once seems nice and pleasant, does not, mere moments later set her friend’s hair ablaze for no other reason that to be amused, which Ymir had a chance of witnessing one day during school. Luckily Aisa didn’t stare at Ymir too long. She pulled a cigarette from green hair’s lips and took a disgustingly long drag of it.

“Took you guys long enough to get here” she told them.

“Where is your driver?” Cat asked.

Aisa pretended not to hear him.

“It’s freezing” Ymir added, hoping to reiterate the importance of Cat’s question.

“I knew this was a mistake” Aisa said to the green hair who seemed oblivious to everything, “that’s all we are going to hear, bitching and bitching.”
“Hey! Did you like those saloid fuses that I stole for you, just so you can flap about in some magical wonderland for ten minutes? We had a deal, now where is your damn driver?” Cat said.

“He’s coming” Aisa said looking directly at Cat, and then turned away to look back at the road.

“What is your leader going to say?” Ymir asked.

“Why would I know that? I don’t even know who it is. I didn’t even know we had a leader. I didn’t even know this group was established outside Bela-Tarr.”

After half an hour all four of them were sitting against the wall, and just as it is observed in behavior of small animals caught in a cold environment, from side to side they were tightly pressed next to each other for warmth. The cold wind didn’t let up and continued to blow around the corners, picking up velocity as it rushed into the small tight places, like the alleyway where the four young people were sitting.

As they waited they all saw the glow in the sky from the bright lights of city center of Bela-Tarr. But they were on the eastern side at the very fringe of the city, where no such lights existed, where it always seemed to be cold. For a long time, Ymir’s family planned to move to the city of Westaphalia, located far away from Bela-Tarr; at the time, it was still a developing city that was devoid of any industrial businesses and it had a large lake nearby. His father could have gotten a job there as an engineer, but then the Red Plague hit and all traveling was banned. Even many years after the plague was over, only restricted traveling was allowed, mainly for public officials or those with enough money to buy a permit. By the time the travel was allowed again, it was too late. His
father became attached to his work and said that he was “too old” to gamble by trying to find a new home. His mother was gone, and all the hopes of moving away gone along with her.

Some hours after, a dark-green truck pulled up next to the alleyway. It was an older model, a type that one would only see around Bela-Tarr, and even then it seemed too old. The four of them listened disheartened to the loud rumbling noise of the engine.

“We wouldn’t be able to sneak around a deaf person traveling in that” Cat said.

Aisa got up; even she was visibly disturbed, because getting caught sneaking out of the city without a proper documentation had severe repercussions. Aisa went to the car and after speaking to the driver signaled for everyone to get inside. Cat, Ymir and green hair got in the back seat and Aisa sat next to the driver.

The driver looked back at his passengers. He was an older man, heavy-looking with a bald head and a thick mustache, some tattoos on his arms.

“This car is very loud” Cat said before anyone had a chance to say anything.

“Loud, yes, but strong” the driver said smiling.

“Do you plan to outrun the gate vehicles?” Cat said.

“Oh, I see what bothers you now,” the driver said, “I wouldn’t worry if I were you. This isn’t the first time that I’ve sneaked things outside. Trust me, I know pathways.”

“Yea? Well it better be some fucking deep underground pathway, where no one can hear this stupid rattling” Cat said.
Driver continued to smile as though he was amused by Cat. Driver looked at Aisa,

“Is that your friend?”

“No, he is not” she said.

The driver smiled again and without any warning stepped on the gas pedal that launched the truck forward with a strong thrust.
3. Celebration

Oskar Brimm stood in line at the train station. Many people were traveling that week for holidays to see their relatives in different cities. Oskar seemed like a child among adults due to his short stature and a boyish face that was brought to attention by large square glasses that he always wore. He adjusted them on his nose, a nervous tick that he had since childhood, and looked back at the long line behind him; they were weary-looking people with swellings under their eyes. A man in a grey suit in front of Oskar bought his ticket and stepped aside to check his pockets for something. Oskar picked up his brown suitcase and walked up to a ticket window where an old man sat slouched, practically sleeping it seemed.

“One ticket for Magus” Oskar said.

“A or B?” the old man groused without lifting his eyes of his desk.

“Sorry?”

“A-Class or B-Class” the old man said agitated by the prolonged interaction.

“Sorry, A-Class. Don’t travel much–“

“Next!” the old man shouted handing Oskar the ticket while at the same time trying to peer behind him so as to hurry Oskar along.

Oskar stepped out onto the train platform and didn’t think twice about the old man’s irritability; no one did, because that’s how people were these days. Whether you went to a market or a food kiosk, a person always expected to be treated with indifference. If you bought some cheese let’s say, no smiles or friendly remarks were ever exchanged. You gave them the money, and they gave you the product. And on it
went, “Next!” And if a person was audacious enough to ask for specific thickness or weight of the cheese, then that person was always prepared to bear some ill remarks or looks, most of the time both. Anything that prevented people from working in a fluid and functional way was subject to ridicule, if not outright anger. Just as a piece of machinery is designed to do a specific job; anything beyond people’s jobs was also beyond their function and care.

Standing on the platform, Oskar saw several stationed steam trains up ahead. They waited patiently until their bellies were full of people and then they would blow out the black smoke and carry passengers across the vast forests to the walls of another city, another resting point, and then they would patiently wait again.

Oskar climbed aboard his train. He moved along the long hallway of the car, looking at cabin numbers. Each cabin was its own small room, typically for four passengers. 203 B…203 B…Oskar thought to himself. His cabin was almost at the end of the car. A young woman with a small girl was already seated in the cabin.

“Good morning” Oskar said.

“Good morning” the young woman said with a smile and then nudged the little girl next to her on the shoulder.

“Hi” the little girl said.

“No we don’t say Hi to grown-ups remember? What do we say?”

“Hello” the little girl said.
Oskar put his suitcase on the luggage shelf above the seats and sat down. People outside continued to scramble towards their trains.

“Do you remember what time they said we would be at Magus? I didn’t get a chance to ask the ticket master” Oskar said.

“Late evening, might even stretch to midnight.”

“Midnight? Are you still going to be awake by then little girl?” Oskar said.

“Ahuh” she said.

“Do you have family in Magus?” the young mother asked Oskar.

“Yes, a sister, and she has a girl who is about as old as you” Oskar said to the little girl, but the girl didn’t respond, because she was busy picking at a loose thread in her clothes.

“You hear that Myka? There is a friend waiting for you in Magus.”

“At Grandpa’s?”

“No, but close, I’m sure. After all, Magus is a small city. Smallest in all districts if I’m not wrong.”

“Quite right” Oskar said.

“Is grandma going to be there?”

“Oh Myka…come on honey we talked about this.”

“Because grandpa said that she might be there the next time I come to visit. He said that the Kingdom of Arrabott is not that far away.”

“Where?” mother asked.
“The Kingdom of Arrabott, it’s deep in the forest. Grandpa says that grandmother likes mushroom soup, and the best kinds of mushrooms are sold in Kingdom of Arrabott.”

Oskar and young mother exchanged amused glances.

“Young girl” Oskar said, “that is an interesting story. But, I do hope that you understand that it is not real.”

“Why?”

“Because they are just stories, tales, they are fiction.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s irrational to believe in such a place.”

The girl didn’t say anything, clearly getting confused by the strange words.

Oskar continued, “If that place was real, we would have found it by now, someone would have seen it. But no one has seen this kingdom of which you speak, and we have maps of every forest to prove it.”

“So where is grandma at?”

“Myka, I told you. You don’t remember? She is dead.”

“Why?”

“Because a long time ago your grandmother became very ill and then she died.”

The little girl nodded and stared at her feet, most likely struggling with some question in her mind.
“You know when you go to sleep” Oskar said to the girl, “and then you immediately wake up hours later, and you don’t remember anything, as though you disappeared for hours and then reappeared back in your bedroom?”

The little girl nodded timidly.

“Well that’s how death is. You disappear just like that, except you never reappear.”

“Never?” the girl said.

“Never. You’re dead” the young mother added.

The girl sat there for a moment, picking at her clothes again and then she looked up and said, “Never?”

“Look honey” the young mother said to the girl while combing her hair, “one day you will understand this, but you should listen to this gentleman, and you shouldn’t believe in anything people tell you. Your grandpa was just telling you a story to entertain you.”

“But he said it was true!” the little girl protested.

“It’s not Myka. Once we reach Magus, your grandfather will explain what he meant.”

The two adults in the cabin looked at the little girl, waiting for more questions, but the little girl said nothing. Oskar looked at the train platform and it was almost completely empty, but there was one man who caught his attention. It was an elderly man in dirty clothes and his head had wild white hair that spread in all directions; he walked in a crooked posture and every minute or so he would bend down his body even more and
pick something off the ground. Slowly the old man drifted closer to the train until Oskar could see his face. The old man had missing teeth and one of his eyes was covered by a white film. He looked at Oskar through the window with an uncomprehending look and then looked down and continued on his way. Oskar watched him stagger away and wondered if his life can end up like that. After the plague, all the resources were spent and the children were expected to take care of the elderly while the “reconstruction” took place but that proved to be a hopeful plan at best. Many of the elderly were left stranded by themselves, dislocated from society and little by little they went insane and were left to wander around public places. Sporadically, one of them would meander to some place unfamiliar and never come back. The old man kept moving across the platform until Oskar could no longer see him from his cabin window.

“What is it?” the young mother asked after observing Oskar intently look out the window.

Oskar sat back down and said “Oh, nothing.”

In the distance the station was getting smaller until it disappeared altogether in the morning mist. Only a vague shadowy outline of the city of Artos remained. Oskar stepped outside his cabin in search of a bathroom. He went across the car, but at the end of it, he found only a utility room. He crossed over to the adjoining B-Class car where people sat in normal seats, like in buses, except each two facing seats had a little table in front of them. Oskar entered just as a man in a blue uniform was addressing the travelers in that car. He stood in the middle of the pathway and had his arms spread, which made it
difficult for Oskar to sneak by. He thought it rude to interrupt the man who seemed to be saying something important.

“Please, everyone! I understand your concern, and you will receive half of your money back—“the man in blue uniform said.

“Half? I want a full reimbursement” an old man with trembling hands said. Everyone in the car voiced their agreement with the remark.

“Full? Are you brain dead you walking corpse? We already left the station, we are already moving toward Magus, and we will be there by midnight as promised. It’s not like we can quickly stop the train and let you out. Get it?”

The old man was upset, but he didn’t have anything to say in return, so he sat down.

“Now about this heating problem” said the man in blue uniform, while Oskar slowly tried to edge by, “this is an older train model. Things break; that’s just the way it is. There is no way for us to fix the problem today. However, we installed this heater,” the man said pointing to a small metallic heater, with wires and cords sticking out of it ungracefully, a hasty and sloppy job, clearly.

“It’s too small” the old man protested again getting up from his seat.

“That’s enough old man! Keep it up and we will evict you from the train, even if it’s still moving.”

The old man sat back down.

“Now, about this heater” the man said and turned his body to the small heater in the corner of the car. Oskar used the moment to quickly skip by the man. “Yes it’s small,
but it will provide a sufficient amount of heat. Besides, you will only need it for about an hour when the temperature at night drops.”

Oskar went across the car and no one paid any attention to him. Instead the passengers’ entire gaze was directed toward the man in a blue uniform, who, judging by their looks, was delivering nothing less than their death sentence. At the end of the B-Class car Oskar was still unable to find the bathroom, so he once again crossed to the next car, and was back in an A-Class car, and immediately to his right was the bathroom. Oskar understood his mistake. Why didn’t he check the other side of his car? “Oh well” Oskar thought and entered the bathroom. Inside were a small metallic toilet and a small metallic sink. Oskar went over to the sink, took off his glasses and washed his face with cold water. He looked in the mirror. A child’s face they always told him. Even now, in his late thirties, he still had the look of innocence that wasn’t shared by many of his age.

Oskar headed back to his cabin. He went through B-Class car where whispers of complaint could still be heard lingering around. The man in the blue uniform was no longer there. Back in his car, as Oskar was moving along the hallway, he heard someone call him.

“Sir...sir...gentleman with the glasses” the voice said from an open cabin behind Oskar.

Oskar went over to the open cabin and saw two men. One was sitting on the edge of the seat with his big belly that was held back by his pants hanging off the edge. He also had a big roll of fat sagging under his chin. The large man reminded Oskar of a toad.
“Sir, will you join us for a drink?” the toadman said with a wide grin that revealed rows of uneven teeth.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t drink” Oskar said.

“Don’t drink? Nonsense, come sit down,” the toadman said grabbing Oskar by the sleeve and pulled him down on the seat next to him. The second man across from Oskar had a pale complexion, a type that was often attributed to people high with fever or those suffering from acidosis, except this man seemed to be in a fine health. He looked very calm, almost to the point of serenity. He must have been somewhere in his fifties and not a lot of hair was left on his head. Besides age, the pale man seemed to be the exact opposite of the toadman. Where one was large and slow and marked by ungraceful characteristics, the pale man was lanky and much easier to look upon than his companion. The toadman put three small glasses on the table and filled them with a clear liquid.

“Thank you, but I don’t drink” Oskar insisted, “besides, the sun is barely up.”

“The sun is always up sir” the toadman said, “and the reason for our drinking is not because we are alcoholics as you probably are imagining by now. No, our jobs don’t allow us such an ill habit. I’m the manager of Artos apartment complex. If I go to work drunk, why, the tenants would destroy all our apartments upon seeing my weakened state. One needs to be forceful and focused to do my job, no drinking on duty. Period.

“And my friend here” the toadman said, pointing to the pale man, “he has the heaviest burden of all; he is a police chief and a damn good one! For six straight years the crime rate went down in Artos. Tell me sir, have you ever heard of such a thing?

“No” Oskar said and admitted that such trend was very unique.
“Not unique, it’s unheard of I tell you! And now imagine my friend here going to work drunk. The entire city of Artos would have burned down by now had it not been for the good, smart, preemptive force of my friend.”

Oskar held the little glass in his hand and nodded his head as the toadman spoke.

“So you see sir, we are not alcoholics. Then why drink at such an early hour you might ask. Well, let me tell you. It’s a celebration! The police chief, my good friend, is going to Magus to see his dear mother.”

“How many people can say that they are going to see their mothers nowadays. We simply couldn’t hold our joy and decided to have a toast. Will you not have one toast with us in celebration of a police chief’s mother?” the toadman said raising his glass. The pale man also raised his glass. Oskar looked down and peered into the clear liquid in his hand.

“To many more healthy years of her life” Oskar said meekly and raised his glass. “To our mothers” the toadman said. The three men clanked their glasses and then emptied them. The toadman immediately refilled them.

“People these days have no respect” the toadman said, “especially the youth. The old ways of maintaining order no longer work. These kids, they go out, get their hands on all sorts of poison and drugs, they form gangs and then they roam around the streets like stray animals. They piss on the walls of our buildings; they loot and vandalize our public transportation and spaces.”
Oskar looked at the pale man who starred out the window and smoked a cigarette which seemed to barely hang on between his fingertips.

“But my friend here” the toadman said “he turned Artos around.”

“How?” Oskar asked.

“By showing them that we are in control, not them” the toadman said almost looking angered. He scooted close to Oskar and whispered “his methods have become mythic in Artos, if you are a criminal that is” he said smiling. “But of course there is always opposition. Lately there has been some criticism toward my friend. Baseless and ignorant criticism that has no other aim than attempt to smear the excellent record of an officer.”

The pale man continued to look out the window; he appeared aloof from the whole conversation.

“What are the claims of criticism?” Oskar asked.

“They say his methods are cruel…”

“Are they?” Oskar asked the pale man.

The toadman answered instead, “Each criminal gets what he deserves. Have his methods been forceful at times? Of course they have, but it was a necessary and a painful sacrifice. At the end of the day, the records show a decrease in violence, gang affiliation, and drug abuse. These statistics don’t lie. It takes a man of extraordinary heart and courage to make such decisions. You understand that don’t you?”

Unsure of what to say, Oskar nodded.

“Then another toast! In celebration of the greatest police chief in all districts.”
The three men again emptied their glasses, although Oskar did it a second late, with his eyes wandering toward the open cabin door. Again the toadman quickly refilled the glasses.

“What’s your career?” the toadman asked.

“Professor of atheism” Oskar said somewhat proudly.

“How happy I’m to hear that” the toadman said, “a noble profession, but it still has a long way to go! There are still too many people who believe in all sorts of Gods and fairies, especially those outside the cities, you know, those who live in forest and live off wild mushrooms and berries, savages. They say they are practicing traditional way of living. Ha! All they want they do is make moonshine and grow opium, and then they cut deals with local police to smuggle in their poison. And then they have the audacity to preach about their God and their soul, filth! No, nothing but complete eradication of religion in all facets of our society is what’s needed. The age of superstition and dogmatic irrationality will finally come to the disgraced end that it deserves.”

“It’s the only reasonable way,” Oskar said.

“Reason is quite right. How can we create a proper society when people believe that their actions are determined by a man in the sky? Surely we are smarter than our primal ancestors. Our society needs to be like a machine, smart, efficient, and productive. Each person is like a cog, valuable and necessary for the machine to run smoothly.”

Oskar nodded in agreement and after a moment of silence said, “Well thank you for inviting me to celebrate the joyous occasion, but I will now head back to my cabin.”

“What number is that?” the toadman inquired.
“Sorry?”

“What’s the number of your cabin professor?”

Oskar stared at the toadman, wondering about all the possible reasons as to why that man would want to know his cabin number, but nothing seemed to arise. Mere friendliness, Oskar thought.

“203 B” Oskar said and turned to head back.

“Wait one minute professor. One minute. Later tonight we will have a small card game in the lounge room. You know, a ‘hush-hush’ game, strictly for those invited. And since you are, a professor after all, a man of reason if you will, I imagine you would be quite formidable in a game of probability, no?”

“Thank you, I will think about it.”

“But you must come! My friend, I insist, besides we are all amateurs. I’m sure it will not hurt you to have a little more money in your pocket” the toadman said winking.

Oskar Brimm had no intention to participate in illegal gambling with Artos city officials, nor was his desire for money strong enough to convince him to go. Yet, he saw no fast way to go back to his cabin until he agreed.

“Of course, I would gladly come” Oskar said.

“Wonderful!” the toadman exclaimed with his widest grin yet.
4. Journey Out

It was still night and the driver drove fast, so fast that the green hair eventually had to stick half of his body out the car to throw up.

“Are you alright there?” the driver yelled over the loud rattling of the engine.

“He’s fine. Ignore him” Cat yelled back.

As the brown digested mixture spewed out of green hair’s mouth, the driver told his passengers how he survived the war. He told them how in the last months of the war, his team was caught in the enemy’s territory after their airplane dropped them off fifteen miles off the target. The pilot later explained that the coordinates were wrong, but everyone knew it was just another case of drunkenness on duty. You couldn’t blame the pilot totally however, the driver said, since everyone else was drunk too, including him, who if not for his drunkenness would have realized the terrible miscalculation of their drop point.

And so, drunk, the driver’s team consisting of sixteen soldiers landed in the hostile territory. That same night, they attempted to set camp, but didn’t do much besides roll out their sleeping blankets. The driver even took a shot at the enemy, but moments later realized it was a tree. Yes, it was a silly affair, and the true repercussions of their error were not clear to them in their intoxicated states until next morning when they woke up to the gun barrels pointing at their faces.

Green hair continued to throw up out the window, while Aisa seemed to be asleep. Meanwhile, the driver continued to speed through the desolate roads at the fringes of east Bela-Tarr. Only Ymir and Cat were listening to the driver’s story, even though
they did not care what the fat ball-headed tattooed-all-over man had to say about the war which had long been forgotten after it got swept under the shadow of the plague. But he continued anyway.

After getting captured by the enemy, the driver said, they were taken to a fortified compound out in the forest. There, all of them were put in the cells. In the first night of captivity, there was a lot of discussion between the prisoners, who still managed to communicate through small barred windows in their cell doors. At first there was blame, most of which was directed towards the driver, who they said was at fault for their capture because his dumb shot gave away their position. But the driver rebutted that had it not been for pilot’s bad drop, they wouldn’t have been in the enemy territory in first place. Then there was fear, as the few prisoners started to lose their composure and began discussing the horror stories of what happened to prisoners of war in the past. They said that at first they would strap you to a chair and “interrogate”, a code word for pulling out finger nails, or they would send electricity through the body, and if these efficient ways proved ineffective against unusually strong-willed prisoners, the captors would begin mutilation of the prisoner’s genitals, by which point the death was right around the corner. Then there was shock, as the prisoners scrambled to find ways to escape their captivity. They slammed against the cell doors; they tried to break through bars. They tried and they tried. Then there was hopelessness as all the prisoners quieted down upon realization that they would not escape. For most of that hopeless night they all sat in somber silence, until heroism arose. The soldier’s name was Baldur; he was a peculiar sort of person, liked by all, yet at the same time he seemed to be at a distance from his
fellow soldiers. He told them not to worry about what might or might not happen. He told them that he had a sister, which came as a shock to everyone, simply because it was a first personal revelation Baldur revealed about himself. He said that she died from the red cell disease, one of the very first cases. He said that when he came to visit her, she couldn’t hear nor see, but only feel, like the feel of his hand touching hers. And when she died, she looked happy and peaceful. He told them that it was something they all should strive for, to meet their end with the same courage and dignity as his sister, because they would all die sooner or later, so there was no point in trying to fight it, because if you fought it now, you would fight it your whole life, and in the end you would still lose. Then Baldur pulled away from his barred window and no longer spoke to the others.

For the next sixteen days, the guards would come into the basement and take one prisoner with them, who never came back. Baldur was the first. Then it was Sindri, then Valdis, then Haldor, and then the driver stopped counting. On the sixteenth day, they came for him. He was the last one. They took him to a brightly lit white room where in the middle was an old wooden chair with straps. They strapped driver to the chair which bore many scars of struggle and resistance. After being bound to the chair, the driver immediately, and without a hint of shame, gave away all the in any-way-relevant information to his captors. He gave them the locations, dates, names, he even told them about planned vacations of some of his superiors, but to his surprise, instead of gratitude his captors only showed amusement.
One of the captors came forward while putting on latex gloves, “We don’t need your information. We have all the information we will ever need. In fact we have too much information.”

“Yes, too much” another captor added, “think of this as just a pointless cruel episode.”

Ymir and Cat looked at each other.

“And what did you do then O brave soldier?” Cat asked the driver.

“What did I do? Nothing.”

“Then why are you here?” Ymir asked.

“I got saved. Just as the captors began their routine on me, a compound siren went off. Our soldiers were launching on assault. None of my captors had guns on them; they weren’t guards, more like doctors, so they couldn’t finish me off quickly before leaving. So instead one of them just stuck a knife in my gut and left, hoping I would bleed to death. Outside I could hear lots of shooting, shouting, and running. In the end, our guys captured the compound, and I was rescued just in time with a pool of blood around my feet.”

“Just like that?” Ymir asked.

The driver nodded.

“I don’t know about your generation, but ours does not believe in tales” Cat said, “and what you just described does not sound like real life. I mean, everything from the hero guy speech, to you being the last one, to the dramatic rescue. I think you are either exaggerating, or just outright lying. I do not believe your story.”
“Neither do I, trust me. Sometimes I think it was just a bad dream, a sick fantasy of sort. But they are all dead and that I can’t deny. What’s worse, I still feel as though I was the cause of their deaths. Yes it was war, but, I can’t help but feel guilt, for surviving.”

The driver slowed down.

“Why are you slowing down?” Cat asked.

“My skeptical friend, we are approaching the outpost line. Whether you believe me or not, I need you to do what I say, or we will get caught. Understand that?”

“Just do your job and take us outside captain,” Cat said.

Green hair was sound asleep with some residue clinging to his chin and jacket. Ymir was almost asleep too. He thought about Baldur and how his sister died, and then wondered if his mother died the same way. He wasn’t sure, but he hoped that she did. Before she got ill, she told him to beware of emptiness. Ymir didn’t know why out of all the memories that he had of her, he thought of that one. As far as he remembered, she said it to him only once before when he was young and she was putting warm clothes on him for the cold weather outside, beware she told him.

“It was not meant to be,” the driver said as everyone observed the dead body of the green hair. They realized the young man was dead when Aisa tried waking him up by shaking his knee, but he remained inanimate. Worse yet, no one seemed to know much about who he was. Even Aisa, who brought him along admitted that she met him only yesterday
evening when she met him to buy some drugs. She said that it was he who gave her the address where to wait for the driver.

For Ymir, the experience was intense. Thoughts of life spent in jail repeated themselves in his mind. Cat on the other hand didn’t seem bothered at all, as at some point he suggested to simply push the corpse out of the car for the cleaning crew to pick up.

“Cleaning crew? We’re near the city limits; there is nothing but trees around, nobody goes through here,” Aisa said. “His body can stay here for weeks.”

“He’s dead. We did not kill him. He killed himself. We need to keep going, and we can’t take him with us for very obvious reasons. It’s tragic; now let’s move on” Cat said.

Ymir remained silent through the conversation. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen a dead body, especially living in Bela-Tarr, where so many take their own lives by jumping into the icy canal; their bodies would then get caught on the bank and remain bobbing on water for days until special crew would arrive and pull the body out.

“Let’s take him over there somewhere,” the driver said nodding to the trees, “later I will leave an anonymous message for one of the police stations.”

In the cold darkness, Cat, Ymir and the driver carried the body out of the car and into the forest. Aisa remained in the car for lookout. They carried the corpse to the nearest dead tree and tried laying him down, but Cat dropped his side too early and the corpse slipped from their hands and landed face down. Cat wasn’t bothered; he turned to
head back to the car. Ymir and the driver remained standing, looking at the ungraceful position of the corpse.

“Should we prop him up?” Ymir said.

“I don’t know. What would it change?” the driver said and started heading back to the car as well. Ymir remained standing alone. He then bent down and propped the corpse against the dead tree. Green hair’s face was covered in some dirt. Ymir got up from the ground and left.

The truck was back on the road in the dead hub of the night. Aisa started to chain smoke cigarettes and remained unusually quiet. Ymir, absentmindedly looked outside his window, while Cat was spinning around his opened pocket knife in his hand. The driver was slouching over the steering wheel, biting his lip as he imagined the body of the green hair laying face down. He wanted to blame someone for the death, but couldn’t find anyone who was at fault, and again he imagined the corpse lying on the ground.

The driver looked back at Ymir and said “did you sit up the body?”

“Will you stop it with the fucking corpse!” Cat yelled, “it wasn’t our fault the poor fellow was an idiot and didn’t understand proportions.”

Ymir thought that at any moment the driver would snap and start pounding on Cat, after all such things happened before. But the driver, who looked like a typical criminal, remained quiet, almost timid. He turned back to his steering wheel.
“Tell me something” Cat said, “you said you were held prisoner during the war. Don’t they give like pensions and shit for that stuff? Why exactly are you involved in this? What’s so great about your little Last Cause group?”

“Last Cause? I’m not part of their group. Someone offered me some money to drive some kids to the Ash forest, that’s it” the driver said, “and the pensions, they barely cover the food.”

“So what do you do?” Aisa asked.

The driver thought for a moment and then said, “I travel.”

Ymir continued to stare outside the window. At the moment he had nothing but hate for his friend sitting next to him. Why didn’t he just listen to Olaf and go home?

“You think we’ll get arrested for this?” Ymir asked the driver.

“I don’t think so, no disrespect to your departed friend” the driver said to Aisa, “but he was a drug addict. I don’t think the police spend too much time with dead drug addicts they find at the edge of the cities. Besides it’s not like we did anything. It was just an accident” the driver lied, although he couldn’t understand why he felt that way.

For a long while the drive was filled with silence. The driver pulled the car off the road in what seemed like a random spot. He then left the car and went over to large bushes near the road. The three passengers looked at him and thought that he simply wanted to urinate, but then, as though by magic the driver lifted one of the bushes off the ground and moved it to the side, revealing a dirt road. The driver got back in the car and drove
onto the dirt path and after few feet stopped. He asked Ymir to go back and put the bush back in the place.

The drive on the dirt road wasn’t long and it soon brought them to a small tunnel.

“During the war they transported missiles through such pathways,” the driver said, “but then the war ended and everyone seemed to have forgotten all about them.”

“Does it lead straight outside?” Aisa said.

“Outside the city? No, but close. It bypasses most of the custom gates. There’s just going to be one more gate to pass.”

“Is there going to be another tunnel? You know, to pass the last gate?” she said.

“No. We’re just going to have to use good old persuasion on that one” the driver said.

“Wonderful” Cat said.

The driver chuckled at something and then pressed the gas. The truck rattled into the dark tunnel.

The tunnel was narrow, barely enough room for the truck to squeeze through. It was also fairly long, so you couldn’t see the end. The driver told them that there used to be lights, but they all burnt out. He didn’t say much else. He had to focus on the road to watch out for any subtle turns.

Ymir tried looking at Cat, but it was too dark inside the car, yet he could still feel him sitting there, enjoying all the extra space that was now available due to the absence of the green hair.
“How are we going to get back?” Ymir asked.

“I don’t know, the guy who paid me didn’t say anything about bringing anyone back. But going back is easy. It’s the leaving that’s the hard part” he said.

“Can you, drive us back?” Ymir asked.

“I don’t know, maybe. Like I said, entering is easy, as long as it’s Bela-Tarr at least.”

“Do you know how to sneak into Westaphalia” Ymir asked.

The driver was silent for a moment.

“What’s in the West for you?” Cat said somewhere in the darkness.

“Do you?” Ymir asked again.

“I do” the driver said.

“When we head back, can you take me to Westaphalia instead?” Ymir asked.

Again there was silence from the driver.

“Ymir are you just going to leave, just like that?” Cat said.

“You can come along” Ymir said.

“And then what, put on a suit and a tie and a clown nose?”

“Can you?” Ymir asked the driver again.

“Y-Yes” the driver said hesitantly “sure.”

Ymir took a deep breath. This was something new, and he knew it, a new start, another chance. Moonlight rays appeared at the end of the tunnel.

“There’s the exit” the driver said.
When the car came out into the light, Ymir noticed Cat staring at him, as though he had been watching him in the darkness all along. The driver continued driving on another dirt road until it led them to a paved road. After moving another set of decoy tree branches, the car was back on the road.

They moved slowly, although there was nobody around them, the driver had to take extra precaution because they were in the restricted territory. They also had to stop several times to run into the forest to empty their bladders soon after they realized just how hungry they were. The driver told them that they could split the loaf of bread that was behind the passenger seats, but he told them not to touch the other bag.

“What’s in there?” Cat asked.

“Loaf of bread, some meat, and a bottle of liquor” the driver said.

Cat immediately reached back to grab the bag, but Ymir stopped him. Three of them ate the bread, while the driver continued looking around. Then he slowed down the car. Ahead Ymir saw under a yellow glow of a tall lamp post two booths and a gate that blocked off the road.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Cat asked.

“Don’t do anything. Just stay in the car” the driver said.

Cat and Ymir tensed up in their seats. Aisa herself was looking around nervously. When the car got close to the gate, the driver stopped the car. Two guards came out from the booths carrying rifles. They both wore warm coats and hats and had cigarettes in their mouths.
“Pass me that other bag” the driver ordered Ymir.

Ymir passed the bag over to the driver who then left the car and went over to the two guards. One of the guards went back to the post booth. The driver talked to one of the guards for a while. Inside the car, they couldn’t hear what the driver was saying to the guard, but the guard didn’t seem impressed. He made no body movements of any kind; he just held his rifle strap over his shoulder. The driver opened the bag and the guard peered inside. Then the other guard appeared and went over and also looked inside the bag. Then the driver put the bag back by his side and continued talking to them until the second guard unexpectedly reached for the bag and took it and went back to his post. The other guard soon followed. The driver went back to the car.

“Did that work?” Aisa asked.

“See for yourself” the driver said as the gate blocking the road slid to the side.

The driver started the car and drove forward. As they went by the gate, Ymir looked at the two soldiers. They were a little older than he, but still young. They suspiciously observed all the passengers in the car. At the last chance, Cat gave them the middle finger, and then the car disappeared into the darkness. They left the city of Bela-Tarr and entered the sprawling Ash forest.
5. The Game

They called it the City of Ashes. Once it was an actual city. People lived there, worked, raised families, and tried to stay out of harm’s way. But twenty years ago, when the red plague began to spread in the city, panic took over. Some people thought that the virus was transmitted through crops, and so, blind with fear, people started burning their harvest. The repercussions were horrific. Famine spread across the city and the countryside. Due to the city’s desolate location, in between two large mountains, and the harsh upcoming winter, it took an extraordinarily long time for the food aid from other cities to arrive, and by the time it did, stories of cannibalism in the countryside were becoming rampant.

With time, more and more people left the city, until only a handful of stubborn citizens remained. Only the empty skeleton of the city remained. But the city did not become renowned simply for its notoriety but also due to its location. A city that was once located in the most secluded part of the country was now one of its most visible spectacles as a rail line was placed on top of the mountain Laru which overlooked the city. Most people who saw the sight didn’t know what to make out of it. Some felt a sense of awe, some fear, and for a select few, this was sadness.

But this was not a historic attraction of any sort and the desolate city was not being preserved as a reminder of the past, no; this city was a dirty historical smear on the country’s modern and clean new decade. In fact, if some passengers on the train looked closely, they would see a few cranes placed in the distance, along with some dump trucks, and some worker camps. Engineers were already traveling through the city,
debating which buildings to preserve, which were few, and which ones to demolish, which were many.

Oskar’s train passed the city of Ashes early in the afternoon. The little girl was looking out the window with great interest. Oskar had seen the sight before and so had the young mother, so both decided not to join the little girl, although their eyes, almost involuntary seemed to always drift toward the window.

After the train passed the empty city, it entered a long forest range. The mother was reading a book of poetry. Oskar felt foolish for not bringing a book himself. He thought about getting up and walking about the train, but didn’t want to run into the two drinking Artos officials he met earlier. He could still taste the alcohol in his mouth. Their meeting left him feeling queer, so instead, he decided to stay put. He was also planning on skipping their gambling game. There were hefty fines for participating in any form of gambling, high enough to cost him his teaching job. If he chose not to go, how exactly would they make him go? Oskar wondered. Would the toadman come to his cabin personally? Does he even remember which number it was? Did they even remember him?

Some time in the afternoon, the young mother took some food out form her bag: a loaf of bread, some meat, and some sliced onions. They ate mostly in silence, except for a few times when the young mother asked Oskar about his sister. Not much to say, he told her.
She is thirty-two and works in a theater. He told her that he didn’t know much about her husband, except that he was away on business a lot. Then she asked Oskar, seemingly out of nowhere, if he had any children. Oskar replied that he didn’t. He didn’t think much about relationships and in general considered the act of sex somewhat beastly. In fact, in his entire life Oskar had only two sexual relationships. One was when he was twenty-two when he met another math student in Artos Institute. And the second was when he was thirty and became involved with a married woman. Both incidents were short-lived, and in general were caused by the other party. Although, occasionally he was struck with bouts of loneliness, Oskar didn’t mind much the solitary life. There was some simplicity to it that he found appealing, and his work kept him busy anyway.

Someone knocked on the door of the cabin 203 B. The little girl was asleep with her head resting on her mothers lap. Oskar tensed up a bit and went over to slide open the door.

A plump man Oskar had never seen before stood in the hallway.

“Are you the professor?” the plump man asked.

Oskar wasn’t sure how to answer; he thought about lying but then said “Yes, I suppose that’s me”

“Good, in that case I would like to invite you to a drink in a lounge room” the plump man said giving Oskar a devious wink.

“Sure, sure” Oskar said, “one second.” He turned back into cabin and noticed the confused look of the young mother as she gently ran her hand over the little girl’s head.

“Just going for a drink with some acquaintances” Oskar said.
“You have friends on board?”

“No, just two gentlemen I met earlier today, I’ll be back soon” Oskar said and left the cabin.

The lounge car was located two cars up. The plump man didn’t say anything. He just led the way and Oskar followed.

“How long do we have till Magus?” Oskar said as they moved through another B-Class car, where some people already had started to fall asleep. The plump man checked the watch on his wrist and said, “Oh, I don’t know, about another three to four hours I would say.”

Loud laughs could be heard coming from the lounge car even before they entered. Inside it was all but empty except for the bartender who was behind the bar, and at the other end there was a table where four people sat. The thick stench of cigarette smoke, blended with an aroma of alcohol, hung in the air. The plump man led Oskar to the table.

“Professor!” yelled the toadman and enthusiastically spread his arms. “You said, you would come, so we waited and waited, ten minutes, twenty, and your still were not here. Why do you make me send people on such silly errands?”

“I apologize” Oskar said, although he knew well that the toadman never specified the time of their game.

“Please sit, we have just begun.”

Oskar looked around the table. Next to the toadman sat the pale man with the same aloofness as before. Across from them sat two people Oskar had never seen before.
One was a small man with large glasses who sat in a very erect position. Next to him was a fat man. On the table, there were glasses with several bottles of clear liquid next to them and lots of cash in front of each player.

“Please sit, professor” the toadman said.

“It is my belief that every gun should be fired at least once” the small man said.

“It’s their purpose.”

“I know how to solve this; now that we have some fresh perspective. You see that old rifle hanging above the bar?” the fat man said to Oskar.

Oskar turned around and saw above the bar an old double-barreled rifle. He turned back and nodded.

“Now he says” the fat man said pointing at the small man “that it’s in bad form to leave a rifle unfired, but I say that such an act would only corrupt its purity, its innocence! And I seem to be the only one of opinion here that the rifle should be left untouched. As a man of reason, what is your take on this?” the fat man asked Oskar.

Oskar felt hesitant to reply.

“Well come on professor, speak your mind” the toadman said.

“The rifle is just an assembly of metal parts, designed to release fast projectiles. It doesn’t matter if your fire it or not. It doesn’t have innocence and it doesn’t have a purpose.”

People around the table looked at him in somber silence.

“Professor…if you don’t lighten up, you won’t survive this night!” the toadman said bursting into laughter.
They were all clearly drunk, especially the toadman. He sweated profusely and his speech was slurred. They all seemed to know each other, and Oskar felt like a stranger at the table. When the game began, Oskar said that he had no money. The fat man next to him sloppily grabbed a handful of cash from his pile and dumped it in front of Oskar.

“I know a good investment when I see one” the fat man said to Oskar “your winnings we split fifty, fifty.”

Oskar looked at the cash in front of him. They were all high denomination bills. Come to think of it, he couldn’t remember if he ever been in possession of so much money at any one moment.

For most of the game Oskar was passive. He held tightly to the cash that was endowed to him. Although the amount of money on the table was staggering to Oskar, the other four must not have felt the same way as a large wave of cash moved from one side of the table to the other, on every, single, hand. Oskar felt out of his element. Although he could detect a fault in logic in many of their plays, especially of those made by the toadman who was betting massive amounts on every opportunity, the mistakes weren’t even close to being big enough to warrant Oskar to bet even a quarter of his roll. Every time Oskar entered the bet, his bet was always raised, by a lot. And then he would shyly toss his cards into a discard pile. It wasn’t in Oskar’s nature to bet so much money on one particular hand. It wasn’t in his nature to bet so much on any one particular moment. In the days when he was a student, he won money slowly, by meticulously capitalizing on opponent’s subtle mistakes. He did not win by one hand or one big
victory, but by many small victories, extended over many hours. But now, Oskar was forced to bet large amounts, not only proportionally to other’s cash rolls, but also literally, which made Oskar very nervous. Every time he looked at his cards, he noticed his hand shake. For the first time ever, Oskar felt as though he was actually gambling. It was almost as though everyone at the table was playing a different game. It was as though the players were in a secret agreement that they were not going to beat each other intellectually, so instead they attempted to conquer each other through acts of fearlessness. Every bet didn’t seem to be based on hand, but rather on the notion of how much the player was willing to bet. Whose will was the strongest—that was the game. And if that was the case, Oskar thought, then the men in front of him were truly insane, for they held no regard for any monetary value in front of them.

The entire hour went by with Oskar looking from the side. Several times he observed two players engage in a betting war, culminating in a cash pot that was bigger than Oskar’s entire three-year salary, only at the end to reveal that both players had worthless hands. Oskar saw through their plays: the weaker the hand they had, the more they bet. But still Oskar could not resolve to bet, because what if, that one time when he would bet, they would actually have good hands? And they did, on rare occasions have legitimate hands.

By the end of the second hour, Oskar was exhausted. Although he managed to win a few small bets when he found himself with chances of winning that were simply too big to let go, he was still hard pressed monetarily. He played conservatively, but the uncontrollable typhoon of cash did eventually consume half of his loaned cash roll. And
all the while they played, they continued to drink and laugh and pretend that nothing serious was happening, while Oskar was sitting grim faced, trying his best to find some flaw that would guarantee his victory, but no such flaw ever surfaced.

Several times, Oskar had depressed thoughts about loosing on purpose. He never wanted to be a part of this stressful experience. He didn’t ask for any of this. A moment came when, amidst the usual outrageous betting, Oskar made an even more outrageous bet, and bet his entire cash roll. He had a good hand, definitely not a hand that warranted such a bet, but amidst circumstances, he figured that was the best chance he would get all night. Looking at Oskar’s bet, the toadman laughed and discarded his hand and then poured himself a drink. The fat man and the small man followed the suite and discarded their cards as well, but the pale man did not, instead he held on to his hand, as the smoke from his cigarette gently floated up in the air. The pale man called Oskar’s bet. Just as Oskar predicted it, his chances of winning were good, seven to ten. The pale man didn’t seem to be phased at the thought of being close to losing an average worker’s entire year salary. In fact he seemed bored. And he still seemed bored even when he won. Oskar’s breath deepened. He lost it all. He lost it all on one unlucky draw. The pale man lazily dragged all the cash toward him, and Oskar was left with nothing.

Although Oskar lost all his money at the moment when he should have won, he was excited about going back to his cabin and to leave the toadman’s company. Oskar got up.

“Professor, where are you going?” the toadman said.
“I don’t have any more money to play” he said.

“But how will you repay me then?” the fat man replied.

The question caught Oskar off guard.

“Repay?” Oskar asked.

“Why yes, you didn’t think that I just gave you all that money for free did you?”

Oskar looked around shyly, “No, of course. How much do I owe you?”

“A lot” said the fat man, “it was close to half of my roll.”

“Well, I, uh” Oskar said mumbling his words, “you can give me your name, or number and I will contact you sometime to repay my debt.”

“Name and number?” the fat man said as though he heard something obscene.

“He’s right professor” the toadman added, “I believe I told you that this was a very informal meeting.” His face was bright red and eyes were glassy. He slouched over the table as though his body was too heavy to uphold in a straight posture. “Now, as I’m sure you know that gambling is illegal in our proud country, because it teaches our people greed and lust. And I also believe” the toad man continued after an involuntary hiccup “that we are delegated officials of the proud city of Artos. Now you may not know those two,” he said pointing at the fat man and the small man, “but you do know us. You know that I’m the residence manager, and my friend is a distinguished police chief. So I just want to make sure of one thing” he said as his face suddenly turned very serious “this meeting cannot ever be known to anyone. You understand that professor correct?”
For a moment Oskar thought it was a joke, but the sober faces around the table reminded him that they were in fact, very serious. “Yes, of course. I understand. I will never tell anyone” Oskar assured them.

“You see” the toadman said to everyone “this man is a man of reason! He understands who we are and what we do. He understands that the extraordinary stress of our jobs allows us a little more leeway in leisure than that of an average citizen.” He then grabbed a bottle and poured himself another drink, spilling some on the table. “Now about the money. He did loan you the money, and you did take it, and as unfortunate as it was, you did lose it all.”

Oskar nodded, suddenly feeling like a man charged of crime standing in front of a judge and his tribunal.

“Clearly, any man with dignity would then take the responsibility to pay off the debt, you are a man of dignity aren’t you professor?”

Oskar gave a subtle nod.

“Then you must repay and for obvious reasons you can’t try to approach us outside this train with money inside some envelope. We have a dilemma don’t we?”

“How can I possibly repay then?” Oskar said, “I have nothing of value with me.”

“Nothing? That’s a highly subjective claim is it not?” the toadman said smiling and showing his ugly teeth. Oskar we repulsed.

“So, Svinum” the toadman said looking at the fat man, “is there anything of value that this man can give you now?”
The fat man looked down as he spun a cigarette in his hand and thought hard. He then mumbled, “I want his hand.”

The table bursted into laughs, as though they were held suppressed the entire time.

“Svinum please,“ the toadman said, “he did not borrow that much from you. You see what I’m saying professor, gambling makes people greedy. Now come on Svinum, ask for something that would be just.”

“It is just!” the fat man exclaimed.

“No, I don’t think it is” the small man joined.

The fat man looked at him disapprovingly, and then started playing with his cigarette again, “fine” he said, “how about just a finger? Does that sound reasonable?”

Oskar stood by the table as the four men discussed the proper terms of what he owed. What did he mean when he said that he wanted his hand? Oskar wasn’t sure. Cigarette smoke was thick in the lounge car and it was hard to breathe or even see. These people did not seem real to him. Their conversations did not seem plausible. Oskar looked around in confusion, looking for a clue to prove that this place wasn’t real.

“Professor?”

Oskar snapped back. “Yes?”

The small man cleared his throat, “we came to an agreement. Mr. Svinum here will bet the rest of his money for a chance to win your index finger. We tried to convince him to just take your pinky and consider the debt paid off, but he wouldn’t agree. Obviously your index finger I would imagine is worth a little more than your debt,
although close. So he put up the rest of his money and the debt for your finger. Do you agree to the bet?”

People around the table stared at Oskar.

“No” he said.

Everyone looked at each other in amazement.

“But professor, you owe this man money” the small man said, “and we did think this through quite logically. The bet is fair.”

“I’m not betting” Oskar said.

The small man looked down at the table in disapproval.

“But professor, this is the only way for you to repay the debt” the toadman said.

Oskar shook his head in denial, “I’m not betting” he said.

“But you must!” the fat man demanded.

“I’m afraid he is right professor” the toadman said.

Oskar looked around to see if anyone would understand, and then he saw the pale man looking straight at him with the look that showed him nothing.

“Now I say we keep this simple and get it over with. We play for a high card” the fat man said.

“I think that’s a good idea, allow me to shuffle the deck” said the small man grabbing the deck of cards.

“Come professor; sit” the toadman said.

Oskar remained standing. He still couldn’t quite come to terms with what was happening. The small man shuffled the cards with speed and accuracy. With shuffling
skills like that, a man can set the deck up in any way and no one would even notice. When he was done, he placed the deck on the table and then again invited Oskar to sit down.

After Oskar proved to be unresponsive, the toadman got up and went over to Oskar and wrapped his arm around his shoulders and guided Oskar to his seat as though he was an old man. “Come, professor come” the toadman said softly.

Dazed, Oskar took a seat. It was quiet and serene. The bartender no longer clanked glasses behind the bar; outside it was getting dark. Only the sound of the train was heard.

“Okay gentleman, ready?” the small man said.

“Let’s get it over with” the fat man said.

“Very well Svinum, you get the first card.”

The small man lifted the top card and flipped it over on the table, showing a jack of hearts. Oskar felt a drip of sweat rolling on his forehead. Unwillingly he was calculating the odds. The chance of getting a higher card was less than one fifth. The toadman congratulated the fat man on the good draw. Oskar thought about jumping out of his seat and running. Running where?

“Ready professor?” the small man said.

Oskar looked as though he didn’t hear him. His right hand on his knee began to shake.
“Professor’s draw” said the small man and lifted the top card, but he didn’t reveal it right away but instead held it in the air and cringed. “Sorry professor” he said and dropped a two of clubs on the table.

The toadman patted Oskar on his back, “tough luck professor, again.”

Oskar’s eyes darted from person to person, what were they really up to?

Suddenly, someone pulled the chair from under him and Oskar went down on the ground. The man behind Oskar then lifted him up and tossed him on the table. Oskar managed to catch a quick glimpse of the plump man behind him.

“I want my finger” the fat man said.

“Oskar tried wriggling away, but the force over him was too strong. The plump man grabbed a hold of Oskar’s arm and extended it out.

“Now professor, don’t wrestle” the toadman said, “Mr. Svinum here used to be a medic during the war. The less you wrestle, the cleaner cut he will make.”

“He’s right” the fat man said pulling out a small pocket knife “I only want what I deserve.”

“No, no,” begged Oskar and then again tried to push away from the table, but the plump man pushed him back with twice the force, slamming Oskar’s body against the table.

“Whoa!” the toadman yelled “watch the drinks.”

Oskar stopped resisting. The plump man again held out Oskar’s arm towards the fat man, who in a drunk stupor was practicing imaginary incisions in the air that never hit the same spot.
“Ready professor?” the fat man said, “I’ll try to make this as painless as possible, although of course, there are limits.” The fat man took hold of Oskar’s hand and folded the other fingers so that only the index finger showed. Oskar closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Oskar felt the knife barely touching his skin, not yet cutting. Complete silence. Oskar was still holding his breath, readying himself for the pain. He waited and waited…

Oskar didn’t know how much time has passed. It could have been seconds, could have been hours. Unexpectedly the large bearing force over him lifted and Oskar was left hanging on the table by himself. He didn’t dare to open his eyes, any moment he imagined the knife would cut in, but it didn’t. Oskar nervously opened one of his eyes.

The first thing he saw was the small man laughing so hard that he didn’t even make any noises. The fat man was lying on the ground to his right, also laughing, with his hands on his large belly. The toadman made weird sounds as he gasped for air through his ugly grin and whipped his teary eyes. Even the pale man, a man who seemed to be devoid of all emotion, was sitting with a small amused smile. A small tear ran down Oskar’s cheek. He wanted to get up, but his legs trembled and wouldn’t lift him up.

“Professor?” the toadman said, still laughing, “did you really think that we would take your finger? Why would we need it?” The toadman gave a sigh of relief, “Oh, I knew it would be fun to have you around” he said as they all continued laughing and Oskar remained on the ground, like a terrified animal, paralyzed and unable to move.
The fat man got up from the ground sighing from a good laugh. “Professor, what kind of gentleman would I be if I made you pay off that debt? Why that would be in the most disgraceful form imaginable. Of course you don’t owe me anything. Any man who holds on to his money with such greed is a man of a sick character.”

“Indeed” the small man added.

Then they went back to their game and no one paid any more attention to Oskar. It was as though he wasn’t even there. The pale man got up from the table and walked across the car to the empty bar. Oskar didn’t dare to look at him, but he heard him opening the cabinet doors, looking for something. The plump man stepped over Oskar’s feet and sat down in his chair and pulled out some money from an inside pocket.

He had to get out of there, Oskar thought, but when he looked at the exit door, he saw the pale man approaching him with an old rifle and a small box. He went past Oskar and put the box on the table. As he glanced at the game in progress, he cracked open the rifle and pulled out two rounds from the box and inserted them into the chambers. He snapped the rifle back and went over to Oskar and gently propped him up on his legs. He guided Oskar to the nearest emergency door at the opposite end of the bar. The pale man pulled the latch, and swung the door open. A gust of cold win came rushing through the open door. Dark trees flashed by. The paleman gently pushed Oskar towards the opening. Oskar looked at the gravel moving quickly underneath and then looked back.

“Jump” the pale man said.

Oskar looked at him astonished. “Why?” he said, “why are you doing this to me?”
The pale man slowly raised his rifle. People behind the pale man continued playing cards as though nothing was happening. “Please, don’t” Oskar begged, but the pale man didn’t say anything, and continued to stare at Oskar, keeping the rifle pointed at him.

“Okay, okay” Oskar whispered.

He turned around and approached the edge. The lights from the train only revealed the rough surface near the rails, but everything else was black. With one hand holding to the side, Oskar did his best to lower himself as much as possible. And then, he jumped into unknown darkness, and landed hard on the ground which caused Oskar to violently roll. His head scraped the ground and he broke his glasses. After he stopped moving, he looked as the rest of the train passing by him. Oskar raised his arm in hopes that someone from the train would see him, but he rolled too far away from the tracks and blended in with the darkness. Soon the last car passed him by and the train was going farther away into the distance. Oskar remained laying on the ground in pain, watching the blurry lights of the train get sucked away into darkness. The sound of the train became harder to hear until only the sounds of crickets remained.
6. The Gathering

Ymir sat under a large oak tree with his back to it. He tried sleeping and succeeded on several occasions as his eyes pulled shut and he dozed off. The gathering turned out to be messier than he thought. There were lots of young people, all confused and violent, brought to the same spot from different cities. Ymir acknowledged that it was an ambitious project to smuggle so many kids outside their cities. There were at least fifty of them. There was even a food stand guarded by a couple of fellows with guns that served soup to anyone who was hungry.

The driver dropped them off early in the morning. There were many people already there. The driver said that the leader would make his speech at night, and that they had the whole day to themselves. Before he left, Ymir again asked the driver if he was willing to take him to Westaphalia and the driver said yes. The driver said that he would come back at night, after the so-called leader had given his speech. Ymir then asked the driver if they could leave right away, but he said that he had to visit an old friend first. Ymir nodded in understanding.

Upon arriving, Ymir and Cat and Aisa split almost immediately. He wasn’t sure where Cat went, but they agreed to meet up later that day. After getting some food, soup with a piece of bread, Ymir left the camp to search for a quiet spot where he could take a nap. At the camp, there was too much laughing and screaming and just general chaos. Not too far away from the camp Ymir found a large oak tree. He sat down under it and looked at the quiet forest around him. Distant shouts from the camp could still be heard,
but just barely. Ymir couldn’t help but wonder what Olaf was thinking then. Was he worried, or maybe happy that he was no longer at the factory? Who knows…

A loud bash awoke Ymir. He looked heavy-eyed to his left where a young man with old torn clothes and spiky purple hair was picking up metal tools that he dropped from a box. The young man jerked back in fright when he noticed Ymir sitting by the tree.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” the purple hair said.

Ymir ignored him and closed his eyes again and slowly tried to drift back to the place where no one bothered him.

“You know the leader will be speaking soon. You should probably start heading back to the camp” the purple haired boy said.

Ymir opened his eyes and nodded to the intrusive fellow. The boy gathered the rest of the items scattered about the grass, mostly small dismembered electrical parts: a radiator crank, heat receptors, charge probes; he put them all back into the box.

“What are those for?” Ymir asked.

“Huh? What these?” the boy said shaking the box. “You know how much gold there is in these parts? The boy put down the box and lifted out of it a cylindrical charge probe and shook it, which made sloshing sound. “You hear that? Pyroxin acid, mix it with some water and you have the hardest liquor in the world.” The boy dropped the charge probe into the box and pulled out small metal square, “Energy Transistor, inside of this, are the exorade fumes, if mixed with sulfate, it becomes a very, very potent
hallucinogenic. Why are you asking me this? Didn’t you go to school?” said the purple haired boy and dropped the small square back in the box.

“Where did you get all that stuff from?” Ymir asked.

“Oh” laughed the boy “we tore apart one of the cars that brought us here. Haha, you should see it, there is nothing left of it. Well I have to go, gotta get this party ready,” the smiling boy said shaking his box and walked away towards the sound that pulsed dreamlike deep from within the forest.

Ymir got up from the ground and stretched. He shook off any leaves and twigs that stuck to his dirty blue factory pants. He still did not know much about the nature of the gathering other than it was a fairly elaborate plan to get a lot of hooligan youth in one spot. Did Ymir belong there? Was he a type of vandalizing youth? Although Ymir didn’t get as much sleep as he would have wanted, he felt rested. He walked alone and peacefully, towards the sound of exuberance not far away.

Over the years, the forests, acquired a darker disposition, since the cities didn’t see much need to expand their areas, and therefore the wilderness remained largely unmonitored, which in turn provided a place for various forms of shady characters to come along and make home there. Not all were shady, it needs to be pointed out, for some simply wanted to escape the fast moving pace of cities and the intense conglomeration of people in small areas, but generally, those who went to the forest, were either those trying to escape
something, those who were lost, or those who were hatching something dark. And Ymir knew it, and felt as though he was being tangled up in something very dark.

Had it not been for Cat, Ymir would have never left the city, but the dumb guy really wanted to be here. Ymir was already forming a strong resolution that this leader was nothing more than a charlatan, a type of person who ran aplenty in these darker and faraway parts of the forest. There was nothing that that man could tell Ymir that he didn’t already know.

Ymir continued on his way and mounted a small hill. At the base of the hill, he saw the camp which grew even bigger since he left it that morning. There was a very large tent at the northern part of the camp, with many old cars surrounding it. It looked like an old army camp, with tents and fires, except it was clearly not. The tents did not follow any particular pattern and one was even on fire, burning brightly in the evening sky. Even from high above, Ymir could distinctly see piles of trash scattered everywhere. All from one day, he thought, incredible. People were fighting everywhere, with the most distinct one taking place in the southern part of the camp where a large circle was surrounding two people who were desperately trying to hurt each other. Ymir descended down the hill, and at its base he saw many young people, like animals running about. They all had crazy hair with colors that could cover the entire color spectrum. They wore clothes that were old, that were ripped, and that had signs and insignias on them that meant to offend or cause some controversy. A young man passed by and on his shirt it said “I wish I had Red Sickle Cell”. Some of the older Last Cause members walked about and tried to organize the rebellious youth and tell them that the leader was about to speak,
but few listened. In fact it appeared as though none of these kids were particularly loyal
to the Last Cause sect. It was almost as though they were complete strangers, just
randomly picked off the streets and carried over to a place where they were told them
they would find a new goal in their life.

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All in all, the camp was filled with what many people in the cities would call human
trash. They were the type of people that one might find skulking at night upon the streets
and sewer canals of Jandek or Barbatos and the like. Depending in which light you
wanted to look at the situation, it was obvious that initial problems occurred because of
the plague, but that was twenty years ago! some would say. It was a common
understanding that something else was now causing the social degeneration. For example
in the view of Jøsen Bruno who is a head of the Chamber Capitol in Bela-Tarr, the cause
of the increased gang violence and general rebellion was due to the increased alcohol
consumption that has been seeping deep into the roots of the family tree, which then left
many young people without the backing support of their parents to face the fast changing
society. But no one bought into that, especially young people themselves, who often
complained of the long and rigorous educational standards, who were made to learn
formulas upon formulas that explained the cold and dispassionate nature of the universe
and then were made to explain the theories of inevitable destruction. Or it could have
been those factories that kept popping up on the city’s edges and blew grey smoke in the
air and clogged the sky with fume which in general made the moods of everyone quite
gloomy, but such melancholy on the young mind could have paradoxical effects and send
them into moods of indifferent rage. But Ymir didn’t agree with that either. The adults have changed also. Sometime after the plague, something has changed, nothing physical. Ymir imagined that maybe that’s the way it has always been; maybe that’s the way life is, dark. But for whatever reason, he wasn’t quite ready to buy into that yet. People haven’t always been that cold or so cruel, he thought, maybe the red plague was too big and too cruel and eventually people gave up. Indeed it was the adults, as Ymir was soon becoming one, and the weary citizens, whom he feared the most, because unlike his rebellious and violent acquaintances who at least acted with purpose and jumped about from desire to desire, the older generations have lacked something more, something much more valuable. The truth was that they all were going mad, and beyond the facade of pleasantness and cooperation; there was a face of cruel malice.

He needed to find Cat soon, Ymir thought. For whatever reason Ymir felt he had to protect Cat. As Ymir walked across the camp it was clear that he didn’t belong. It was clear by his actions that he was a stranger to the camp, mainly because, he simply walked. He didn’t run; he didn’t scream; he didn’t fight or wrestle; he wasn’t drunk, nor did he dance to the loud electronic noise music blaring somewhere from the side of the camp. Even though his dirty work pants seemed to belong, his plain sports jacket, which has long ago acquired a shade of grey, without out any shocking insignias, made him stand out quite a bit.

Ymir did not have a clue where to start looking for Cat, since the camp had changed so much in a day. He decided to head towards the northern part of the camp.
where the so-called leader was to make his speech. As he walked through the camp, he was greeted by two people who were unashamedly having sex just a foot step away from the walking path. Further down, a young man was lying on the ground with his face in the puddle of mud, and even further down, a person was taking a shit next to a tent, which did not cover him from the public view in any way. The shitting person smiled and waved at Ymir. Ymir continued walking.

There was a great deal of jostling around the large tent where many people were told the leader was getting ready to speak. A dozen or so older members of the Last Cause kept a watchful eye on the excited crowd, which grew bigger by the minute as more and more people came towards the small stage that was set up in front of the tents.

Ymir tried to look over the crowd, but all he could see was the spiky colored mohawks and shaved heads. Ymir nudged himself into the large foul crowd of people and began pushing people out of his way. Everyone who was pushed, pushed Ymir back and was ready to start a confrontation, but Ymir didn’t pay much attention to the shoves and insults, he just scanned all the faces and continued on his way. As the night settled, it became harder to see the people. The only two sources of light were the two bonfires on the sides of the stage.

Eventually Ymir made his way through the entire crowd and was spat out on the left side of the large tent. Again he looked around, but it was hopeless as the night shaded everyone except the people next to him.
“Where is he?” Ymir thought. He looked up at the sky and noticed how clear the stars were. He had never been outside the city and had never experienced the beautiful sight of an unfiltered night sky. Ymir looked around to see if anyone else was looking at the sky, but found that everyone’s gazes were directed to large tent in front of them.

“Here he is!” someone yelled.

Ymir looked back and saw a large bald man in a yellow robe get up on the small stage, and even though the stage was truly small, the man’s height made him seem as though he was truly towering above them all.

“Silence!” the booming voice proclaimed, and everyone was silent. The giant man spread out his arms forward.

“I know why you all have gathered here tonight, on this very night, at this exact spot, at this exact moment…”

“Yeah, you brought us here!” someone yelled in the crowd.

The large man laughed at the remark.

“Is that why? Are you here because I told you to be here and now you are here? I don’t blame you for your error. For so long you have been told by your teachers, your bosses, your district managers that you are nothing but cogs and tools to be used. Just because I invited you all here tonight, does not explain the reason why you are here. You chose to come here, you wanted to come here, and most of all you wanted someone to speak, because your lives are filled with emptiness that is slowly tearing your lives apart!
You are all desperately trying to find the meaning in your life, but instead all you can find is destruction and lust, but I’m here to give you that meaning.

“No so long ago, although to many of you it may seem like a distant past, a great thing occurred, the red plague. It swept across our lands like winter storm and it chilled our hearts to remind us of what it means to be alive. The plague was a message to show us that we have uprooted ourselves from our soil and have gone too far from our own human form to become a decadent race. We are a race equal to that of wild boar or pig, a race that lives upon it’s satisfactions as its daily aim. They say no one knows where the red plague appeared from, but I do!

“It was claimed that it was born in nature, but how wrong they are, for any man of reason can see that the red plague was the creation of the human touch! It was born from the horrendous practice of men probing themselves and radiating their own molecules to see what sorts of unnatural effects it would cause in them. That is not human! The red plague was unleashed on the world by the very scientists who claimed that they would save lives, that illness would be forever gone, but we all know the results…”

Ymir, a little ways back, observed the jittery calmness of the crowd, but couldn’t tell if they were listening, or just mocking the large man in front of them. That robe did look silly.

“And as we watched the red plague spread, and saw the ones close to us wither away…some man, some sick man in lab coat, alone in the dark room…discovered the vaccine, and so they went back to their perverted ways of disfiguring an already damaged and mangled human form. Do you see what I’m saying to you?! The red plague was just
the beginning, and they have actually managed to convince us that we are now safe. They have tried to put out a fire with fire! And because of these scientists, there will be more plagues, and more deaths, and more people like you, who will be born alone...

“We must fight back. We must fight back. Over these last eight years, I’ve been traveling from city to city, looking for people like you to come and join our cause. To fight for the last cause that will ever be fought for. The cause to return humanity back to its natural human form! Who’s with us?!” shouted the large man on a small stage, and the crowd in front of him cheered with great enthusiasm.

Again, Ymir failed to sense the crowd’s authenticity, for he knew that above all, his generation’s attitude was that of disregard and mockery.

“Who is with us!?” the large man shouted again, and the large crowd again jumped with great enthusiasm. The large bald man seemed pleased. Again he extended his two arms to promote silence.

“Good, good” he said,” and I have a plan. As the leader of this Last Cause, I have a plan about how to bring back the dignity of our human lives. We must protect ourselves against these gross molestation, by fighting back. We will destroy any laboratory, or any building that proclaims to experiment upon the human form. We will set fires to the buildings and any of its agents, because they have brought nothing but harm to us, and they will cause future harm unless we stop them!”

“You want us to blow up buildings?” someone yelled in the crowd.

“That is what we must do. We have the tools, we have the resources, and by tomorrow morning, if you are still steadfast in your resolution to fight back for humanity,
join us, and you will receive your mission! And with fear we will remind them of what it means to be human.”

“Can we blow up a chamber capitol?” inquired a creaky voice from the crowd.

The large bald man extended his arms again, “Please, I understand your urge, and the government officials too have a bloody stain upon their hands for allowing such experimentations to go on, but for now our goal must be focused and clear.”

“Can we blow up a police administration office?” someone said and was instantly backed up by large cheer, “I mean, of all the people that tread on my humanity and all, I would say it’s those dirty razzers, always knockin me about when all I wanna do is have peaceful piss upon their pristine walls.”

“Can we blow up some of these tents? You know just to practice a bit?” someone said and again was greeted with a unanimous cheer.

The large bald man put down his arms and frowned at the crowd.

“Do you have the bombs with you? Are they in that tent?” someone yelled.

Ymir stood by the fire to warm up as the night chill covered the camp. He was smiling to himself, but soon became serious. “I need to find Cat. We have to get out of here” he thought. A familiar face passed in the glow of the fire, and he reactively caught that person by the arm.

“What are you doing!” the person said.

“Ah Aisa, glad I saw you, hey have you seen Cat anywhere?”

“Yea, he is out there, in front of the large tent.”

“You sure?” he asked.
“Yea, I’m sure” she said annoyed. Ymir still held her by the arm.

“Can you let go of me?” she said.

“Are you going back there?” he said.

“Yea why? Do you want me to show you where he is?”

“Yes, can you, here let’s go” he said.

“That’s fine, just let go!” she said ripping herself from Ymir’s grip.

“Okay, calm down” he said.

The two of them walked back towards the large crowd that was becoming increasingly animate. Some people walked away from the crowd and came around the large tent to look for bombs.

Now, it must have been hard to hear, because there was a lot of loud shouting going on, and things were being thrown, and therefore no one could blame anybody for not noticing a man running down the hill who was yelling something. As the crowd of young delinquents continued to demand their bombs, one of the guards of the tent, came over to the large bald man in a yellow robe and whispered to him that there was a man running down the hill. This, for obvious reasons alarmed the large man greatly, for if the man was carrying the news of a coming police, it would mean that he would have to cut his operation very swiftly and run.

“Be quiet everyone!” the large bald man yelled over his unruly mob, yet they continued to yell and demanded bombs.
“Be quiet!” the large bald man yelled again, except this time everyone went silent as the man’s deep voice trembled through the camp. Ymir acknowledged to himself that although the man was a foolish imposter, his voice did belong to that of a king.

The man was running down the hill to the right of the large tent. Everybody followed the gaze of the large man, and then they too saw a small figure coming down, clearly trying to say something. As everyone watched the man run towards the camp, Ymir chose to take this as his opportunity to find Cat. He started to make his way through the crowd towards the very front.

“What is that guy saying?”

“I can’t hear…f-f-f-ire?”

“There is fire?”

“There is a forest on fire?”

The large bald man whispered to one of his guards, “Is that one of ours?”

“I think so master, I believe we sent Mimir out there” he said.

As the man was almost at the base of the hill, dodging small trees, it became clear that the man indeed was yelling fire.

The mob scattered itself and moved closer towards the running man and Ymir was forced to go along with them, swirling around every person and looking directly into each face.

“Fire! There is a fire” the man yelled and moved towards the crowd with his head bent down out of exhaustion until he was finally looking at the dirty boots of the crowd.
The young man breathed heavily with his arms on his knees, and said “there is a train. It’s on fire.”

“Ah what?” laughed one person, “what did you say? There is a train that is on fire?”

“Yes, it’s stopped not to far from here. I saw it just as people were beginning to unload.”

“Everybody quick, think of all the cash that is up for grabs. We must go there quickly before the police arrive” said one person and took off towards the hill from which the person descended. Everybody, instinctively and excitedly followed.

“No!” yelled the large bald man, “you must leave those people alone! We have a greater task at hand!”

“We’ll be right back!” someone yelled as they ran towards the hill.

Ymir was caught in the stampede of running jackals, but just then, probably for no other reason than chance, he saw the small body of Cat running along like an imp who was up to no good. Without hesitation, Ymir quickly caught up to Cat and tackled him to the ground “Gotcha!” he said.

“Fuck you! What the—, Ymir?” Cat said looking up at his assailant. “What are you doing, get off me!”

Ymir got up, “Sorry, I really didn’t mean to bring you down that hard.”

“Where you been all day? I was looking for you” Cat said. “Never mind that; come, let’s go see the train. There is probably money there, because believe me, there is no money around here.”
“No Cat, we have to leave, all these people are going insane.”

“You’re going insane. Think of all that cash that everyone carries with them on trips. Now come on!” Cat said.

“No, Cat, no!”

“Okay, okay, we go to the train, we see what is going on, and then we leave. Besides we are so behind by now, everyone will get their hands on things before we even get there.”

“No Cat, we need to go, there is nothing good over there.”

“Well fuck you then” Cat said and started running after the mob that was now courageously mounting the hill.

Shit, thought Ymir, as he watched his friend run farther away from him, and then he took off after him. After a few moments, the camp was cleared, and only the large bald man in his yellow robe remained standing on the small stage, with a few guards behind him. He looked back at them and said, “Animals, savage animals…”

■

In the darkness of the night, Ymir was in fast pursuit of Cat, that little bastard. There was nothing left to do but follow him and make sure that he stayed out of trouble, and then they’re out of there. Most of the mob had cleared the hill and was now running toward the tower of smoke that stood high above the treetops and faded away in a clear moonlit sky. Up ahead, the mob was making howls and threatening shouts. Finally, Ymir caught up with Cat and ran next to him. Cat was running out of breath fast.

“You know what they could do to that train?” Ymir said heavily.
“It’s on fire, can’t get much worse” Cat said taking a long breath, “stop talking…I’m out of breath…”

Ymir ran next to his friend; again giving another thoughtful look to the clear night sky.

“Look up Cat, ever seen sky like that in the city?”

Cat didn’t say anything and ran with his head bent low.

“You better not run like that, you might hit a tree” Ymir said.

“Shut up! Just shut up Ymir!” Cat screamed and stopped to catch a breath.

In the distance, more wolf-like howls appeared.

“Listen to them” Ymir said looking towards the tower of smoke.

Cat breathed out once more and then started running again. Ymir reluctantly followed.

Cat and Ymir caught up with the rest of the mob who were spread out among the tree line. In front of them was a small green field illuminated by moonlight glow and across it was the rail-line, where a massive black train stood motionless. One of the middle cars of the train was completely engulfed in fire, and the fire already had begun to spread to the neighboring cars. Around the fire one could see shadows running about in hectic frenzy.

All the hooligans hid behind the trees, although it was difficult, since there were about fifty of them, and they all nudged and pushed each other. It was surprising that nobody heard them from the other side. One person got up and then walked out of the
treeline. Everybody calmly followed. Ymir was sitting crouched with Cat who was also trying to walk towards the train, but Ymir was holding him down.

“Come on, let go of me!” Cat demanded, “let’s get some money and get the fuck out.” Ymir let go of Cat and followed him out towards the train. As the mob moved across the small field, they resumed their jackal-like run and started making terrifying noises to scare off the passengers who were scattered around the burning train. Like dogs starving for meat, the delinquents descended upon the passengers and their belongings. Ymir momentarily lost sight of Cat, who similarly must have lunged at someone’s luggage like the rest. Ymir found himself in the middle of everything. Terror, the real terror took him over. It was a scene reminiscent of the images of hell that were portrayed in the books which have long been banned in all districts, but his father had a few copies that he kept hidden. In the scene around Ymir, there was a large fire that seemed to surround everything, and the fire that reached to the very tips of the sky. Men and women desperately tried to hold on to their luggage and their belongings as the hooligans kicked and punched them and grabbed their hair to make them let go. Some passengers Ymir noticed started running away. There were screams, there were shouts, and then there was a loud bang…Everyone’s attention turned to the right side of the train, where a lanky man with a smoking rifle stood, and in front of him laid a small body next to a luggage. Ymir walked over to the bloody body and saw Cat gasping for air. Ymir then looked up at the rifleman, who was tall and thin and had an unusually pale complexion that was distinguishable even under the white glow of the moon. The man didn’t seem fazed or distraught. Ymir looked into the paleman’s eyes, they were calm and peaceful. For the
first time Ymir realized what true emptiness looked like. The pale man pointed the rifle at Ymir and shot without a moment’s hesitation.
7. Animals of Arrabott

The moon peacefully hung in the sky. Somewhere in the darkness, among the sounds of night birds and crickets, Oskar Brimm moaned in pain. He managed to get off the ground, but only after many failed attempts. He thought that his leg may have been broken, but he wasn’t sure. What bothered him the most was the tight pressure in his right temple. When he went to feel it with his hand, he noticed that his fingers were left smeared with blood. He tried looking for his glasses by palming the ground, but it was pointless really; everything was dark and blurry. He might as well have been blind.

Oskar was confused about where he was or what happened. Disoriented by pain he started going in a random direction. As he limped along he felt the soft grass under his feet and occasionally he bumped into a tree. The farther he got, the sicker he got, until at last, the wave of nausea overtook him and he realized that he couldn’t go on. All that was left was hope, that despite the probabilities, he would survive. Oskar tried taking another step forward, but then collapsed face down on the ground, and unconscious, Oskar dreamed about his mother. He was small back then, sitting in the passenger seat of the car next to his mother as she drove them outside the city to a very small village. The road was bumpy and unaccustomed to be driven by vehicles. Oskar asked her where they were going. To see a doctor, she said. Being inquisitive, Oskar asked his mother what happened to the doctors in the cities. His mother told him to stop pestering her because the road was very narrow and rocky; the last thing they needed was a blown tire, she told him. She was nervous, tired-looking; it made Oskar uncomfortable inside to see his
mother like that. There it is, she said pointing at three small village houses down the dirt path.

She parked next to the first house and told Oskar to wait in the car as she went to look for someone. Still in her business suit and heels from work, she seemed incredibly out of place as she tried her best to avoid muddy spots as she walked towards the house. A fat woman in old farm clothes and thick boots came out to greet Oskar’s mother. He couldn’t hear what the woman and his mother were talking about, but after a small chat, his mother went back to the car, grabbed her handbag from back seat, and told Oskar to come with her. The fat woman led them through the muddy inner-yard filled with chickens and pigs and a sleeping dog. She took them to the third house, and inside it was dark and humid. Oskar and his mother remained standing in a narrow walkway as the fat woman went down the hall and then turned right into one of the rooms at the end. Oskar’s mother bent down and combed his hair, and then told him to just smile and be quiet, Oskar nodded and she smiled and kissed him on the forehead. The fat woman glanced out of the room and called them down. It was a spacious room for such a small house, and was lit by daylight that came through two large windows at the sides. At the end of the room sat what looked like a man. Oskar couldn’t tell, because the figure was covered in an old brown robe from head to toe, and it was sitting in a strange position, as though the body possessed a twisted form.

The fat woman led Oskar’s mother to the robed figure and then stepped away. She approached Oskar and told him to sit down on the chair and he obeyed, and then watched his mother get down on her knees as the robed figure mumbled something in a hushed
voice. Oskar saw the figure raise his right arm, and from the robe appeared a mangled
hand. His mother bowed her head and the figure made a sign in the air that Oskar
couldn’t recognize. When his mother got up and went back to him, Oskar saw that her
face was covered in tears. She took a seat in the chair next to him and the fat woman
nudged Oskar on the shoulder and whispered for him to go to the man. He looked at his
mother who smiled and nodded. He then got up and cautiously went over to the figure
and under the shadow of the hood, he could partially see the face of the man; it was full
of large bumps that all but entirely hid his eyes and his skin was strange. It wasn’t as
smooth as Oskar’s, but ragged and torn-looking. Oskar stood nervously in front of the
seated figure and in fear he averted his eyes to the window and then heard a small
chuckle. Oskar glanced at the man in surprise, and somewhere underneath the shadow of
his hood and behind abnormalities of his face, he thought he saw a smile, but he wasn’t
sure.

“What is your name young man?” the figure asked in a weak voice.

“Oskar,” he replied just as quietly.

“Come closer to me young man,” the figure said.

Looking down, Oskar took one step forward. The figure raised his arm and made
a sign over Oskar’s head and then lowered his arm back down.

And then as though nothing has happened, the figure asked, “Do you get good
grades in school?”

“Yes,” Oskar said as he raised his head slightly.

“That’s good, school is important,” he said.
Oskar nodded timidly.

“It was nice meeting you Oskar, and your mother,” the figure said and then Oskar felt the hand of the fat woman on his shoulder. He looked up at the figure and thought that he saw another smile.

The fat woman led Oskar and his mother outside where it was cool. Go back to the car, his mother told him. Oskar did as told. His mother talked with the fat woman by the entrance to the inner-yard. They appeared to be discussing weather as both occasionally tended to look at the sky. They talked for a while and then his mother pulled out a wallet from her handbag and gave the fat woman money. The fat woman smiled and nodded and then waved them good-bye as Oskar’s mother got back in the car and ungracefully turned the vehicle around and got back on the narrow, bumpy dirt path heading home.

As Oskar lay unconscious on the ground shivering from the night cold, the driver was making his way through the Ash forest after visiting an old friend, who lived in a small cabin deep in the labyrinth of the forest, away from the city-folk who, he swore, wanted to steal his soul. It was a thing with him, always talking about his soul, how precious it was, how clean. And when the driver visited him again, it was no different. Immediately upon seeing the driver, his friend remarked upon how sick he looked. But the driver was thinking the exact same thing about his friend, who wore an old, torn, blue-striped sailor shirt, and had large blue circles under his eyes as though the man hadn’t slept in years. The friend invited the driver inside for a few drinks. Soon the driver realized that his
worst thoughts about his friend were becoming true as the inside of the cabin was a mess: dirt everywhere, spider webs grew in all corners unbothered, the smell was horrific, but none of that seemed to bother his friend, who, after pouring drinks, began to maniacally speak about his soul and how much cleaner it was than the driver’s. The driver initially planned to take short rest at the house, but after listening to his friend speak uncontrollably about how the society was probing away at the innocent essence of their souls, the driver knew that his friend was no more. So after his friend went to get another bottle, the driver snuck out of the cabin and drove away.

He didn’t know where he was driving. He promised one of the city kids that he would take him to Westaphalia, but it was a lie, a useful lie to divorce himself from the situation quickly. He wanted nothing more than to get paid and go back to the city. Still, a good kid, the driver thought, and felt guilty for even being a part of this dumb scheme. The driver knew nothing about the Last Cause sect or what their agenda was, but he understood that if you had to stage a meeting so far away from city lights, then it was of a malicious kind. But the driver needed money. Smuggling illegal goods between the cities did not pay enough, besides how different could it be to smuggle some kids across instead of some goods?

“Pick up the kids”, they told him. “Drive them to this location,” they gave him a small map. “Drop them off and that’s it.”

“When will I get paid?” the driver asked.

“The place where you drop them, there will be some people from the organization, they will pay you.”
“How would...these, kids get back?” the driver asked.

“Get back? Who cares, they’ll find a way. Just make sure they arrive at this location before nightfall.”

And the driver did just that, he got them there almost a full day ahead of schedule, ahead of all the other drivers. The image of green hair flashed in his mind. Would he have died had he not taken them outside the city? Would the green hair have managed to get to the hospital and get treatment before he overdosed? Would he have been alive had he not taken the money, the driver wondered. He imagined green hair’s decaying corpse laying facedown in some remote part of the forest. The driver slammed on the brakes and screeched down the lonely road. He turned his old truck around.

“Fine, you want to go back? Go back” the driver said to himself. “I’m far away, sure, but if you drive fast enough, you might catch them.” And so the driver sped through the night with a newly discovered feeling of urgency.

The driver hadn’t had a good sleep in almost two full days, and it was torturous to drive through the night. He suspected that he might even have begun to hallucinate, for his meeting with his old friend seemed like a bad dream, a nightmare. And so it came as no surprise to the driver when drove by a small hill near the road, just as the morning glow began to appear in the sky, and saw a body of a man laying on it. The driver smiled to himself, and then saw through the rear view mirror somebody crawl onto the road on four legs. The driver stopped in the middle of the road and looked back. Yes, it appeared as though it was a body of a man crawling on the road, but that simply couldn’t be. “No it
couldn’t be” he thought. The driver slowly backed the car down the road until his rear lights covered the man on the road in a red glow. “What the…” the driver said to himself.

The driver stepped out of the car and went over to the man on the ground, who managed to whisper, “help”, before he passed out. The driver looked around frantically to make sense of it, but saw and heard nothing, just calm forest in the early morning hours. The driver dragged the man to the car and with some effort managed to put him into the passenger seat. The driver got into the car swearing, and then accelerated down the road, continuing to swear. He looked at the man and saw his bruised face and a big patch of blood on right side of his head. The driver shook the man on shoulder, “Hey! Hey! Wake up you son of a bitch”, but the man didn’t respond. “Fuck fuck!” the driver yelled.

An hour later, the driver pulled up to the checkpoint gates of Magus. When he came running out of his car, one of the guards instinctively raised his rifle.

“There is a man dying in my car; he needs help!” the driver yelled to the guards.

One of the young guards briskly ran toward the car and after seeing a body slouched in a passenger seat he signaled to the other guard to call an ambulance. A white car with screaming sirens and a red cross on its side pulled up to the checkpoint twenty minutes later. The guard led them to the driver’s car, where the men in white clothes examined the body of the unconscious man. One of the medics said to the guard that the man was still breathing. They loaded him onto the stretcher, and then placed him in the back of the ambulance and sped away.
Afterwards one of the guards offered the driver a cigarette to calm his nerves. He took it.

“How did you find the man?” the guard asked.

“He was crawling across the road in the middle of nowhere,” the driver said.

The guard nodded to the strangeness of the situation and then asked “why were you driving through the Ash forest by himself at night?”

“Was coming back from seeing an old man,” the driver told him.

“You’re friend lives in a forest?” the guard asked.

“Yes, he is an eccentric,” the driver said.

“Indeed,” the guard said.

“Can I leave? I need to get to Bela-Tarr,” the driver said.

“I’m sorry sir,” the guard said, “but you will have to fill out some formal information.”

“How long will it take?” the driver asked.

“There is a detective coming down right now,” the guard said.

The driver nodded and put his cigarette out. “Sorry kid” the driver whispered to himself.

“What’s that?” the guard inquired.

“Nothing” the driver said.

“Want another cigarette while we wait?” the guard said extending a cigarette.

With a strange sense of resignation, the driver took it.
The detective arrived at the check point soon after. The driver observed the detective get out of the police car. He looked somber and walked with slouched posture and a cigarette with a long ash dangled from his lips. At first he talked to the guards and then went over to the driver and told him that they had to go to the police station. The driver said that he was just a stranger driving by and that he was of no importance. The detective nodded apathetically and told the driver to get into the police vehicle.

“Fine, I will follow you in my car” the driver suggested to the detective with a sly plan of speeding away sometime during their travel.

“No, leave the car, it will be here when you get back” the detective said and started going towards the police car. Hesitantly, the driver followed.

At the police station, things seemed very hectic. Everybody was running about with some important purpose. The driver sat next to a drunk who was brought in for public nuisance, and a young man with a black eye.

“What happened to your face?” the driver asked.

“I tried stealing a car” the young thief said.

“Cop hit you?” the driver asked.

“Nah, I saw a man go into the store and he left his car door wide open. I jumped in, but there was guy sitting in a passenger seat, I didn’t even see him. So he got me right in the eye.”

The driver laughed and the young thief seemed to find it amusing too. The driver started thinking about his police record. It was clean in general, except for a few alcohol
related blemishes. They should believe his story, especially since he helped the man, the driver thought. He was also thinking that after they let him go, he would go back to the forest and try to find the kid. It’s not too late…not too late, he kept saying to himself. Who knows, maybe they are all still there, same spot where he dropped them off.

Eventually the detective came out and called for the driver. The detective took him through a small hallway and then to a room where there was a chair, a desk with papers and lamp, and a small window up above. The detective went around the table, threw some more papers on his table and then sat down. He then took out his cigarettes, lit one and tossed the pack on the side. With smoke blowing out of his nose he massaged his temples a bit as though he had splitting headache. The driver took a seat across.

“How were you in the Ash forest?” the detective asked.

“Visited a friend” the driver said.

“Write where he lives” the detective said pushing a paper and a pen forward.

The driver picked up the pen thoughtfully, and after looking at it he put it back down. “I don’t understand, have I done something?” the driver asked.

The detective narrowed his eyes a bit at the driver and drummed his fingers on the table momentarily and then said, “there’s been an incident close to where you picked up the man. Big incident.”

The driver raised his eyebrows and then shrugged his shoulders to tell the detective that he didn’t know anything about the incident.

“There was a train that caught fire due to faulty heating unit” the detective said “the train stopped, everyone was evacuated, and then… a group of about thirty people,
according to our estimates, so far all of them between fifteen and twenty four, appeared out of nowhere and raided the train. Now, why there were thirty youths in a forest in the middle of the night is beyond me or any of my colleagues at this moment.”

The driver sat speechless.

“They were looting the burning train for money we are guessing right now” the detective said.

“Was anyone hurt?” the driver asked.

“Oh yes, I’ve been there this morning, it’s quite a horrific scene actually…you see, someone opened fire on them.”

“On the kids?” the driver said.

“Yes, right now we can’t exactly tell who it was, but according to the registry there was a police chief from Artos on board. So, it’s just a guess. Anyways, apparently these thugs didn’t like being fired upon much, so they ravaged the train. And I do mean, ravaged it. Some men and women where beaten beyond recognition, fifteen dead in total, some passengers, some kids.”

The driver remained silent.

“All passengers scattered throughout the forest. Right now they are probably hiding somewhere in there, too scared to come out. I figure the man you brought in was beaten by up by them kids and then ran away. There is just one problem, you’ve picked up the man some distance away from the place of the incident. Too far away for him to walk in the condition in which you claimed you found him.”

The driver sat quietly, confused about what was happening or what to do.
“Can you explain that?” the detective asked again.

The question snapped the driver back, “Are you saying I’m somehow involved in this?”

The detective leaned backed and stubbed his cigarette out. “If you were a suspect, you wouldn’t be sitting in the comfortable chair in which you find yourself. You’d be down on the lower levels, speaking with men stronger and more persuasive than me. But this situation doesn’t make sense to me, and from my professional experience, when faced with inexplicable situations, it’s best to treat everyone with a distrustful eye” the detective said with a sarcastic smile.

A police officer poked his head in the room, “detective, they’re brought in some more passengers.”

“I’ll be right there” the detective said and the police officer disappeared back in the hallway. The detective sat back up grouchily and lit another cigarette, and said “perhaps that batch of passengers was more observant than the last.” The detective got up and walked around the table and put his hand on the back of the driver’s chair and bent down, “look, perhaps in a couple of hours I will give you my sincerest apology, but for now, you better get your story straight and hope that it checks out, I’ll be back in a little bit” the detective said and then left the room.

The driver sat in silence. He couldn’t think, everything seemed muddled, and then with crystal clarity, he saw the body of green hair laying facedown in the forest. The driver looked at the small window up above, through which a small beam of light came through. Suddenly the driver felt tired. He felt tired from the things he was doing and the
things he did. He remembered about his promise to the kid and at that moment it seemed like the only thing worth a damn. “Do this one thing, and be done with it. Be done with life,” the driver said to himself. “You’re still out there and you’re still alive and I will find you”, the driver thought. He then leaned forward and grabbed the paper and the pen. He wrote on it, “Not far from Mayak plant in east Bela-Tarr, on the outer road, there lays a body of young man with a green hair. You’ll find me at 1989 Rhine Street, Building No 7, Apt 12, Bela-Tarr. Name: Makaali Vochebargo.” The driver folded the paper and put it under the pack of cigarettes. He then got up from the chair and went out of the room.

People moved briskly up and down the hallway and nobody seemed to pay any attention to the driver. He walked down the hallway and out into the lobby. A man at the front desk glanced at the driver for a moment but then looked back down. The driver went to the front doors and left the building.

Oskar Brimm regained his consciousness two days after he was brought to the hospital. They said he suffered a severe concussion, and at one point slipped into a coma. An hour later, after his awakening, he saw his sister and she couldn’t stop crying. She kept asking him what happened and Oskar kept saying that he couldn’t remember.

“You were beaten by a bunch of young thugs” she finally said.

“Was I?” Oskar said in surprise.

“Yes,” his sister said and handed him the newspaper. He asked for her glasses, and after putting them on he saw on the front page an image of a train on fire with red
lettering above that said “Massacre in Ash Forest!” The nurse came over and told him that he shouldn’t read. It might aggravate his headache, but Oskar read anyway.

“I don’t remember any of this”, he said. The nurse told him that it would take sometime before he would regain his memory, if ever.

Oskar’s leg was found to be broken after all and was equipped with a white cast, but his quick recovery surprised everyone. After a day, he was limping all around his room with his crutches and a strong appetite, despite strong orders to remain lying. And after the second day, he was transported to the lower level, with some of the other non-intensive patients. Some of his hospital bedmates inquired as to how he survived the ordeal, but they were let down when he told them that he couldn’t remember any of it.

Then the detective came. He walked into the room in a crooked posture that seemed menacing to Oskar.

“So what happened?” the detective asked.

Oskar couldn’t tell him anything because of his memory.

“You don’t remember anything at all?” the detective said amazed.

“Nothing,” replied Oskar.

The detective walked around the room a little bit agitated and then went toward the door.

“A man brought me here” Oskar said.

“But how do you know that Oskar? You said you didn’t remember anything,” the detective said.
“My sister told me, she called the police station.”

“The man that brought you here is gone,” the detective said.

“He left the city already? I didn’t even have a chance to thank him,” Oskar said.

“What shame,” the detective said and left the room as quickly as he came.

Things were looking better. His sister brought him a new pair of glasses on his third day at the hospital and also, through some unexplainable desire on his part, a book of poetry.

“I never did understand poetry” she told him.

Oskar replied that neither did he.

They let Oskar out from hospital on the fourth day, even though he had lain in a coma just a couple days before. Besides his leg and a fractured skull, he seemed to be in a perfect health, the doctor told him and his sister. That night, she came to pick him up.

After getting in the car, Oskar saw a little girl sitting in the backseat of a car.

“Ari, do you remember Uncle Oskar?” his sister asked the girl.

“Yes” she said “what happened to your leg?”

“I had a bad fall, but I’m feeling better now” Oskar told her.

His sister lived in an apartment on the third floor of a ten story building. The little girl carried the grocery bags while Oskar’s sister helped him up the steps. The apartment was nice, modern, much more stylish looking that Oskar’s place would ever be.

“Where is Gael?” Oskar asked.

“Oh, he is always gone. He’ll be back late this week.”
Oskar took a seat at the kitchen table near large windows overlooking the city of Magus. His sister began cooking something at the other end of the room. The little girl came to the table with some white papers and colored pencils. She spread them all around the table and began drawing. She drew a strange looking animal that resembled a stag but had small wings and a long lion-like tail.

“What kind of an animal is that?” Oskar asked the girl.

“I don’t know its name, but me and my friends saw it one time near the forest. We think it comes from the magic Kingdom of Arrabott, but we’re not sure.”

“You saw it?” Oskar asked.

“Yes, from far away though. Kingdom of Arrabott is the oldest kingdom in the forest. There are all sorts of different animals there. They protect the forest from bad people.”

Oskar nodded, watching the girl grab another white sheet.

“You don’t believe me do you?” she said.

“Ari, what are you doing over there?” yelled her mother, “I hope you not pestering your uncle; he had a very long trip.”

“No” the girl yelled back.

“Why do you say that Ari?” Oskar asked her.

“What?” she said.

“Why do you say that I don’t believe it” Oskar asked.

“Because adults don’t believe it.”

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Oskar sighed, “You’re right Ari, I don’t. But…but you do, and for now that’s enough” Oskar said and closed his eyes. He tried to imagine such kingdom; he imagined himself deep in the forest, standing in front of massive golden gates that brimmed with shine. Oskar took one step closer and the gates opened, washing him in bright light.
8. The Burial

Ymir felt as though he’s been walking for a very long time in a place that seemed very alien to him, as though it was a world altogether different. The dense morning fog obscured everything that wasn’t within his immediate reach. The forest seemed much more peaceful now. No screams or blood, everything seemed peaceful and pure. Maybe it was just the fog, covering everything in white, tricking Ymir into thinking that the place has somehow changed. Ymir couldn’t tell if he was being tricked or not, but it certainly seemed like everything was real.

His breathing was heavy and he had to sit down to rest for a moment. He found a large tree and leaned against its trunk. He put a hand over his stomach in discomfort. The pain eased. The temperature was still low from the cold night. Blades of grass where wet as the thin frost melted on them. Ymir looked around. Not a sound, not a movement, just trees and fog.

Ymir still couldn’t figure out where he was; he had to be close. When he started he felt as though he knew where he was going, but then lost his sense of direction and time in the endless white haze. It was as though the clouds from the sky decided to levitate down and meander upon the earthly soil, to observe the human deeds. His hands began to shiver from the cold. Ymir got up and continued on his way.

Ymir found his way to the tree line that he was looking for. He crouched down on his knees behind the bushes just as he had done long time ago, and imagined a burning train
across the field. He imagined that the sky was again dark, and that he wasn’t alone. Everyone was there, including Cat who was crouching right next to him.

Ymir got off the ground and came out of the tree line by himself. He went across the open pasture to the railroad tracks. The burn marks from the fire had all but disappeared as the new grass grew over the once scorched land. The only visible burn marks where on the rails themselves. One could see a grey hue on the iron and the blacked wood underneath them. But looking both ways down the gleaming railroad tracks, it is doubtful to believe that anyone passing by would even notice such marks. Indeed, the railroad coming from and to seemed as clean and glistening as did before. But maybe it’s just the fog again, playing tricks on his eyes.

Ymir took a few steps back from the railroad and then got down on the wet morning grass. He plunged his hand into the ground and dug a small hole. He shook off the muddy dirt from his hands and reached into his pocket and took out a small pocket knife and placed it in the hole and then pushed the dirt back over the hole and padded the ground to smooth it out. Ymir again looked around to see if someone might have been watching, but there was no one. Clutching his stomach Ymir got up from the ground and shook some grass from his pants. He put his hands into his jacket and walked away from the railroad track back towards the tree line. It would still be sometime before the sun would rise and illuminate the forest and the fog was still thick. As he walked back, Ymir thought that he heard a noise in the distance. He stopped and listened carefully. It was a familiar rattle coming from the north. Right away Ymir started jogging towards the sound, but as he ran, it became hard to hear the distant noise over the rustling of leaves
under his feet. Ymir didn’t dare to stop out of fear that he would lose his chance to find his way back quickly. But after some time, with no end to the trees, Ymir stopped and listened again. He held in his breath and listened for the sound, but then sharp pain pierced him in the abdominal and he had to breathe out. Again he held in his breath and tried to listen, and the only thing he heard was a call of a bird far away. He continued standing there in silence to make sure that the sound was truly gone. All around him was nothing but trees and fog. Calmly, Ymir started walking again, keeping his ear open for the sound.