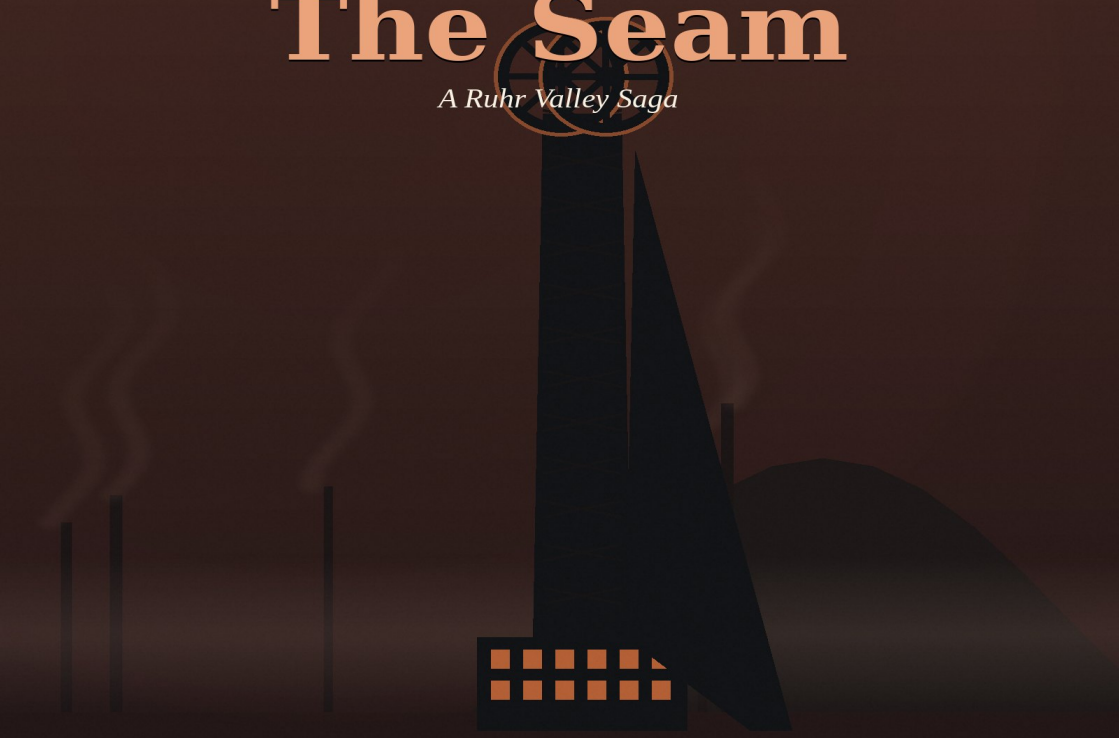
VOLUME TWO

## At the Face

*Voßlohe, 1929–1948*

# The Seam

*A Ruhr Valley Saga*



**aban news**

Novel · written with Claude Opus

# The Seam - At the Face

*Drama / Family and Social Novel*

aban news

geschrieben mit Claude Opus · aban news

. . .

# Chapter 1 - At the Face

At the face — that was the place above all places, the point at which a man stood opposite the mountain, man against rock, the pick against the seam. Everything else was the way there or the way back: the descent, the roadway, the cage. At the face the real thing happened, there the coal that fed Voßlohe was wrested from the mountain, and there, at twenty-one, August Kortmann was in his element.

He had become a good hewer, better than his father, some said, and August liked to hear it and did not let it show. He had the body for it, broad in the shoulders, and he had the ambition that drove him, to manage more tubs than the others, faster, cleaner. He wanted to be something, and in the district one became something by being the best hewer, and then perhaps overman, like his father, and August was not ashamed of this aim, on the contrary; he wanted to outdo his father, behind whose silence he had always suspected a weakness, a ducking nature he, August, did not share.

What August did not know was everything. He did not know how his father had become overman. He did not know what the house stood on in which he had grown up, and the money that had let him grow up without hunger like the Brass children. He knew the old feud between Kortmann and Brass, but he took it for one of those family stories of which there were many in the district, quarrel over nothing, long ago, and he had even played with a Brass as a boy and thought no further of it. His father had never told him anything. His father never told anything. That August took for weakness, and it

was the opposite, but he could not know that.

That spring August got to know Lena. She was the daughter of a hewer from the neighbouring colony, a dark-haired, slender girl with a straight gaze that August liked from the start, because it pretended nothing. They danced at the pit festival, and August, who otherwise made no grand speeches, found words with her, and she laughed at the right ones and was silent at the right ones, and by the end of the evening August knew he would marry her, the way he knew he was the best hewer: without doubt, without haste, as if it were already settled.

"The Hoffmann girl, Lena," said Bertha when August told of it, and nodded slowly. Bertha had grown old, her hair grey, her face tanned by the years, but her eyes as clear as ever. "A good choice. She has a head on her. She won't be fooled." She looked at August, and in her gaze there was something August did not read, a worry that went beyond the joy. "Take care you don't have to fool her, August. A woman with a head sees through you. That's good, as long as you have nothing to hide."

"What should I have to hide," said August, and laughed.

Bertha said nothing to that. She looked over at Wilhelm, who sat at the table and was silent, the way he was always silent, and something passed between the two old people, a look August did not read, and then Bertha said: "Nothing. Marry her. She's good for you."

In the autumn of the same year, when August was already engaged to Lena and dreaming of a household of his own, the news came from America, from the stock exchange that had collapsed, and no one in Voßlohe at first understood what an exchange in New York had to do with a pit on the Emscher. But they were soon to understand. The coal the district mined went into the steel, and the

steel went into the world, and when the world stopped buying, the steel stopped needing, and when the steel stopped needing, the coal stopped selling. It was a chain, long and invisible, from a counting house in New York to the face where August stood, and at its end stood always the hewer with the pick, who first felt it when the chain drew tight.

Still the winding ran. Still August struck his tubs, more than the others, and dreamed of Lena and of rising. But over the horizon, far off still, there stood a heat-lightning, and the old, who had already lived through crises, saw it and were silent, and Wilhelm was one of them, and he watched his son stand at the face, full of strength and hope, and knew that the strength and the hope counted for nothing against what was coming, and did not say it, because one did not say such a thing and because August would not have listened anyway.

. . .

## Chapter 2 - Idle Shifts

They called them idle shifts, and that was the bitterest mockery the language of the district knew. Idle. It meant: the pit does not run, you stay home, you get no wage. No one was idle. One sat in the colony and watched the little savings melt, and waited for the notice that said whether tomorrow one might ride down or must again be idle.

The crisis ate its way through the district like firedamp through a gallery, soundless and deadly. First they cut the shifts, then they dismissed the youngest and the oldest, then they shut down whole installations. At Morgenstern they soon ran only three days a week, then two. August, the best hewer, who struck more tubs than anyone, now struck none on most days, because there was nothing to strike, because the coal he mined no one bought. His skill, his ambition, his strength, all of it was suddenly worthless, for it was not needed. There was no worse humiliation for a man like August than not being needed.

The colony grew poor, fast and visibly. Whoever was cut off was threatened with the house, the old threat, always the same: whoever does not work for the pit does not live in the pit's house. Families moved away, to relatives in the country, or they stayed and crowded eight to a room, and in the gardens grew no more ornament but cabbage and potatoes, every square metre, for the garden was now a means of survival.

And politics came into the colony as never before. On the walls hung posters, red and brown, and on the street corners stood the recruiters, the one lot with the fist and the song of the Internationale,

the others with the promise of work and bread and a fatherland that would make everything good again. They courted the same men, the hungry, unemployed, humiliated men, and sometimes one crossed from the one side to the other, depending on who had spoken last, for desperation was no conviction, it was a hole into which anyone could speak who wished.

Otto Brass stood on the red side. He was a man in his thirties now, hard and convinced, a functionary of the party that stood furthest left, and he spoke at the meetings the way his father had once spoken, of the solidarity of the workers, of the overthrow of the gentlemen, of a world in which the mines belonged to those who toiled in them. August heard him sometimes, at the edge, and was not convinced; Otto's fire was too great for him, too demanding, and something in him, which he had from his father without knowing it, mistrusted the big words and the many who were to become one.

Others in the colony went to the brown side. They too came in uniform, marched, sang, and they promised what the men most longed for: not a distant revolution, but work, soon, now, and a pride that cost nothing, the pride of being a German, if one was not allowed to be a fed man. August found that not convincing either, but he found it less demanding, less dangerous for a man who wanted to be something, and that was the first, small difference that would later become a great one.

In front of the kiosk Reds and browns brawled. It was a Sunday evening, and it was about nothing, a word, a look, and then they lay on top of each other, the men who all shared the same misery and beat each other's heads in instead of standing together against those who administered the misery. August saw it and did not step between them and did not go away either, but stood and watched, and beside

him stood an old hewer who shook his head and said: "That's how they win. The ones up top. If we tear each other apart, they don't have to lift a finger." And August thought of it and forgot it again, because he was young and thought of his own happiness, of Lena and of the day the pit would run full again and he would be needed again.

. . .

# Chapter 3 - Lena

They married in the middle of the crisis, poor and resolute, in the spring of thirty-two. There was no great feast; there was soup and home-baked bread and a jug of beer, and that was lavish for that time. The neighbours brought what they could spare, an egg, a handful of flour, and that was ample. Lena wore her mother's dress, taken in, and August the one good shirt he had, and they stood before the registrar and then before the pastor, and Bertha wept, which August had never seen in her, and Wilhelm stood beside her and was silent and looked as though he carried something heavier than joy.

They moved into the narrow pit house that had been allotted to August, two rooms, and Lena made a home of it, with the few means they had, and with that competence Bertha had recognised at once. She was not one to complain. She was one to take hold, who stretched the little, who made something out of nothing, and August, watching her come home from the garden with earthy hands and a basket of cabbage, often thought he had been lucky, luckier than he deserved, without knowing how true that was.

At the wedding Otto Brass had been there too, not as a guest, but because he knew Lena's father, from the party, and had stood at the edge. When August once stepped out alone, into the cool evening air, Otto stood there smoking, and for a moment they were alone, the traitor's son and the betrayed man's son, without August knowing either.

"Congratulations, Kortmann," said Otto. "Good woman. The Hoffmanns are decent people."

"Thanks," said August, a little stiff, for he sensed that something lay between Brass and Kortmann, even if he did not know what.

Otto smoked and looked at him, appraising, a long time. "You don't know much, do you," he said at last. "About your family. About what was."

"What's supposed to have been?"

"Ask your father." Otto threw the cigarette away, trod it out. "Or better not. He won't tell you. Your sort tells nothing." He paused, and in his face there was something that looked almost like pity, a bitter pity. "Take care in the times that are coming, Kortmann. Bad times are coming, worse than you think. And in bad times it shows who a man is. Some families," he looked at August, "some families have already shown once what they do when it gets tight. They sell. Take care you don't sell what can't be bought back."

August did not understand the barb. He heard only an embittered Red making dark hints, as was their way, and he did not want to understand them, because it was his wedding day and he wanted to be happy. "I sell nothing," he said, almost amused. "I have nothing to sell."

"Everyone has something to sell," said Otto. "That's just it." And he went back inside, and August stayed in the evening air, and the sentence stuck in him, without his knowing why, a stone in the shoe one does not feel while standing and that presses with every step.

Inside, later, as the guests were leaving, Wilhelm took his son aside and pressed an envelope into his hand, money, more money than August would have credited the old man with in those times.

"For the start," said Wilhelm. "So you don't have to begin from nothing."

August took it gratefully, moved, and did not ask where it came from, where an overman in the crisis, with idle shifts and a cut wage, could still put so much aside. He took it, the way children take, without asking, and Wilhelm gave it the way he gave everything, with a face that carried more than generosity. It was, right at the bottom, always the same money, the wage of the rise, the wage of a name that had once fallen in a warm counting house, and now it passed on, into the next generation, as clean wedding money, and no one saw in it what it had grown out of, least of all August, who counted it and was glad and bought Lena a second bed with it.

. . .

# Chapter 4 - The Flag on the Headframe

In the spring of thirty-three a new flag hung on the headframe of Morgenstern, red with the black hook in the white field, and it hung where no flag had ever hung, right at the top, above the wheel, visible to the whole town, and it meant that everything had changed and nothing.

It went quickly. So quickly that people could hardly keep up. The free unions, the union for which Heinrich Brass had once fought and died, were smashed, their houses occupied, their funds plundered, their men arrested or intimidated. In their place stepped the German Labour Front, into which everyone now belonged, whether he wished or not, and which made no more demands but required allegiance. The strike, the weapon of the many, was abolished, forbidden, made unthinkable. What generations of miners had fought for was gone in a few weeks, and most watched and were silent, because talk was now dangerous, more dangerous than ever before.

Otto Brass was one of the first they fetched. He was known, a Red, a ringleader, and such men one fetched first. They came in the early hours, the way one always fetches the ringleaders in the early hours, and took him away, and he vanished into one of the early camps, of which people spoke only in whispers, somewhere in the moors, and for years one heard nothing more of him. Käthe Brass, grown old, did not live to see it; she had died the year before, following Heinrich, and so it was Otto's wife who had to watch them fetch the son too, and the Brasses, who had already lost everything once, lost again.

August saw it, and it was none of his business, he told himself. He was no Red. He had kept out of everything. Politics was nothing for a man who wanted to be something, and now, with the one lot up top and the others vanished, it came down to behaving correctly, inconspicuously, reliably.

And then they offered him the overman's track.

It was the same mechanism that had seized his father twenty-eight years before, only in a new garb. Reliable men were needed, now more than ever, men who did not kick, who carried out, who stood by the new time. A good hewer like Kortmann, diligent, unpolitical, from a good house, that was the ideal candidate, if only he did the right thing: joined the right organisation, showed the right conviction, went along where one had to go along.

August joined. He joined what one joined if one wanted to become overman in those years, and he told himself it was only a formality, only a means to an end, only for the family, for Lena, for the child that was now on the way. He even believed it. He believed one could join without belonging, go along without going along, change the shirt without changing the man beneath. It was the old self-deception, the same with which his father had comforted himself, the same logic in new dress: I do the wrong thing only for my own, so it is no wrong.

Wilhelm saw it. The old man, bent now, his hair white, saw his son put on the white shirt, the overman's shirt, in those years, under that flag, and he recognised himself, recognised the choice he himself had made, returning in his child. He could have said something. He was old, not much more could happen to him, he could have said: August, I know this road, I walked it, and it does not lead where you think. But he did not say it. He was silent, the way he had always

been silent, and his silence now had a new reason: whoever has betrayed himself has no right any more to warn the son against betrayal. The silence Wilhelm had imposed on himself as a punishment thus became the tool with which he let the son run into the same misfortune, and that was perhaps the bitterest fruit of his old deed: that it took his voice in the one moment when the voice might have changed something.

"Congratulations," said Wilhelm when August got the promotion, and it sounded like condolence.

"You're not glad," said August, almost reproachfully.

"Yes I am," said Wilhelm. "I'm glad you made it." And he looked away, over to the window, out to the headframe on which the new flag hung, and said no more, and August took the looking-away for the old man's usual silence and not for what it was: the looking-away of a man who watched his son climb the same wall behind which he himself had walled up the dark.

. . .

# Chapter 5 - Coal for the Guns

The work came back, and it came because there was rearmament. Few grasped that, and those who grasped it did not say it. One saw only that the pits ran full again, that the idle shifts ended, that the wage was a wage again, and one was grateful, dully grateful, the way a man is grateful who has long gone hungry and at last eats again and does not ask where the bread comes from.

It came from the blast furnaces that glowed again, because they made steel, and the steel became cannon and tanks and ships, and for that one needed coal, much coal, ever more coal. Morgenstern ran day and night. August, overman now, drove the production forward, as was his task, and the figures rose, and with the figures rose his standing, and with the standing came a modest prosperity: a larger pit house, three rooms now, a garden in which more than cabbage grew, a new suit for Sundays.

Marga was born, thirty-four, a dark, lively girl with Lena's straight gaze. Four years later came Jakob, a quiet, sturdy boy who took after his father. August was a good father, as far as a miner could be a father who was half the week underground; he carried the children on his shoulders, taught them to whistle and the names of the birds, and on the free Sundays they went out as a family, across the fields that still existed then at the town's edge, and for a few hours life was good.

The price of it was the looking-away, and August paid it without looking, the way one pays such a price. People disappeared. The Jewish merchant in town, where Lena had once bought cloth, was

one day no longer there, and his shop neither, and no one asked aloud where to. A hewer who had said something wrong in his cups about the man whose picture now hung everywhere was taken away and came back changed, quieter, and never spoke in his cups again. One learned to see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing. One lowered one's eyes and did one's work and was grateful for the bread.

August was good at lowering his eyes. He had learned it from his father without knowing he had learned it, this art of not seeing the unpleasant, of protecting one's own and leaving the rest to itself. It was a family art, inherited like the broad shoulders, and August practised it with a good conscience, because he told himself he did no one any harm, he only looked away, and looking away was no doing.

Once, on one of those good Sundays, they sat in the garden, Lena, the children, old Wilhelm, who had the grandchildren on his lap, and it was a picture of happiness, a real happiness, not a pretended one. The sun shone, Marga laughed, Jakob slept against Wilhelm's chest, and for a moment everything was as it should be. But over the garden, behind the houses, the wheel turned, mining the coal that became steel that became weapons, and in the distance, where no one looked, something was building up, a pressure, a roof, that would one day come, and old Wilhelm, who held the grandchildren, looked over their heads into that distance and knew, with the certainty of one who has already survived a catastrophe, that this happiness was on loan and that the reckoning would come, the way it always came, and that the children who now laughed in the sun would have to pay it.

. . .

# Chapter 6 - War Underground

The war came again, in September thirty-nine, and this time no one marched off with music and flags. The older ones remembered the last one, the names the pastor had read from the pulpit, ever longer, and they were silent when the news came, a silence that knew more than any cheering.

Again the miners were needed, essential to the war, again exempted, for without coal no steel, without steel no war. But this time exemption was not enough. The war ate men at a pace that hollowed out the exemption; ever more hewers were called up despite everything, sent to the front, because the front ate more men than it could spit out. The young, strong hewers vanished, one after another, and behind stayed the old, the half-grown, the maimed, and with them August was to hold the same production, more even, a higher one, for the war demanded more coal than peace had ever demanded.

It could not be done. That was clear to August from the start, and it was clear to the directorate, and it was clear to the War Office that demanded the figures. With half as many men twice the coal, that was a sum that did not add up, and yet it had to add up, by order, and when a sum may not add up and yet must, then someone pays it with his life.

August felt the pressure from above like the roof above him. The directorate passed on the pressure it got from the office, and August was to pass it on, downward, to the men who were already working at the limit. Faster. More. The safety, which had never been great,

became a bargaining chip: a timbering that could still wait, a ventilation that still sufficed, a seam that was really too dangerous, but which had to be worked because the figure demanded it.

August manoeuvred. He was no bad overman; he tried to protect his men where he could, turned a blind eye, reported more favourable figures upward than reality gave, to gain time, to cushion the pressure. But he could not stop the pressure, only distribute it, and to distribute meant to decide who bore it. As long as it was only German hewers, old comrades, August distributed it carefully, fairly, as best he could. But soon came others, on whom one took less consideration, on whom by the will of those up top one was to take no consideration at all, and on them it would show what August really was.

For the production had to be held, and the men were lacking, and so they brought men who had no choice. First prisoners of war, then the deported from the occupied lands, forced labourers, as they were euphemistically called, as if it were a kind of work and not a kind of slavery. They came in transports, emaciated, frightened, in rags, and they were housed in a barracks camp at the edge of the pit, behind barbed wire, guarded, and in the morning they were driven to the descent, down into the mountain that forgave even the free men little and the rightless nothing.

August saw the first transports and lowered his eyes, the way he had learned to lower his eyes. But he sensed that the looking-away would not suffice this time. These men would work in his district, under his supervision, at his face. He would no longer be able only to look away. He would have to decide, day by day, what he did with people who were delivered into his hands, and for the first time in his life August grasped that there was a boundary beyond which the

looking-away itself became a deed, and that he was nearing this boundary, with every transport that halted at the camp.

. . .

# Chapter 7 - The Foreign Workers

Tadeusz Wójcik came in the summer of forty-two, with a transport from the east, and was assigned to August's district. He was nineteen, a slight boy with dark eyes and hands that seemed too large for the thin arms, a farmer's son from a village near Kraków, whom they had dragged off his field, into a mountain he had never heard of, into a language he did not understand, into a depth that was meant to kill him and was in no hurry.

On his chest he wore a sign, a piece of cloth that marked him as what he was: a subhuman, in the language of the time, a tool to be used up. He was not allowed into the Germans' washhouse, not at their table, not into their houses. He got less to eat, worse, and more work, harder. He was rightless, completely, a man one could beat, starve, kill with impunity, and everyone knew it, and most behaved accordingly.

August was overman over him. That was the situation, soberly: a man who as a boy had been forbidden to hate with Brass children, who was good with Lena and carried his own children on his shoulders, was now set over another human being like a man over an animal, with power over his life, and the time he lived in demanded of him that he exercise this power the way one exercises power over an animal.

In the first days August lowered his eyes. It was his method, and it had carried him through much. He assigned Tadeusz where men were lacking, drove him where the quota demanded, and did not look at him while doing it, for to look at him would have meant to see him

as a man, and to see a man and treat him so, that even August could not bear. So he looked away, treated the tool as a tool, and told himself it was not him, it was the circumstances, it was the war.

But Tadeusz would not let himself be quite overlooked. He was a good worker, that was the first thing that penetrated August's lowered gaze: the boy could do something. He grasped the mountain quickly, faster than many a German, had a feel for the rock, for the pick, for the rhythm of the work. And he was not broken, not inwardly; despite everything he bore a dignity, an uprightness that shone through the rags and the hunger and the sign on his chest, and it was precisely this dignity that made it hard for August to see him as an animal, for animals have no dignity, only men have dignity.

Lena began to pass bread over the fence.

She did it secretly, in the dusk, when the guards changed, a piece of bread, a potato, through the barbed wire to the men in the camp, who grabbed for it like the starving they were. It was mortally dangerous; whoever supported forced labourers was punished, harshly. Lena did it all the same, without much ado, the way she did everything that had to be done, and she said nothing of it to August, because she knew it would burden him, him, the overman, the man in the organisation, who looked away.

August noticed it all the same, the way one notices such a thing: the bread that was missing, the way Lena went in the dusk, her silence about it. And he said nothing, and in his silence there lay for the first time not only cowardice but also something else, a quiet approval, almost a gratitude that his wife did what he did not dare, that in his house someone did the right thing, even if it was not he. It was little. It was almost nothing. But it was the first crack in his looking-away, a first light that penetrated the lowered lids, and it

came, the way the good often comes, not through him but through the woman at his side, who had a head and a heart and who had not let the circumstances teach her to take a man for a tool.

. . .

# Chapter 8 - Tadeusz

It happened in a bad seam, in the winter of forty-three. August was at the face with Tadeusz and two others, a small gang, the timbering thin because the wood was scarce like everything, and August checked the roof, the way he always checked it, with the ear, with the hand, and heard nothing bad and gave the sign to work on. He was mistaken. The roof came without the cracking that otherwise announced it, a sudden break, and August stood beneath it, frozen for half a second, the way his father had once frozen, and in that half second Tadeusz was already at him, tore him aside by the arm, with a strength one would not have credited the thin body, and the roof fell where August had stood, rock, dust, a thundering, and then silence and Tadeusz's hand still on August's arm.

It was the same scene that had once bound Wilhelm and Heinrich, thirty years earlier, in a different seam, under the same mountain. The mountain repeated itself, the way it always repeated itself, and put to August the same question it had once put to his father: what do you owe the one who saved your life?

August stood in the dust and looked at Tadeusz, for the first time really looked at him, the boy who had just saved him, him, the overman, the man of the gentlemen, although to Tadeusz August was nothing but a supervisor, a tool of the power that had dragged him off. Tadeusz could have watched the roof crush August; no one would have held it against him, no one could have proved it against him. Instead he had saved him, out of a reflex of humanity that sat deeper than all circumstances, and in that reflex lay an accusation

sharper than any reproach: Tadeusz had shown himself a man in the moment when August treated him as an animal.

"Dziękuję," said August, the one Polish word he had picked up, thank you, and it was the first time he addressed Tadeusz like a human being.

Tadeusz only nodded, curtly, and took up the pick again, for the quota had to be held, now too, just now, and a forced labourer who did not work on made himself suspect. But between the two something had shifted, irrevocably. August could no longer overlook Tadeusz from now on. He had seen him, and what one has once seen one can no longer unsee.

In the weeks that followed August did what he could, which was little and dangerous. He assigned Tadeusz the less deadly work, where it was possible, without its being noticed. He slipped him bread, secretly, the way Lena did it, August's bread to Lena's bread. He turned a blind eye to small offences that would have driven another supervisor to report him. It was a requital in small things, an attempt to pay off the debt of his life, the way his father had once tried to pay off the debt to Heinrich with charity, and it was just as insufficient, just as self-serving at bottom, a means of living with one's own complicity rather than a real making-good.

Lena saw the change and was glad and worried at once. "Be careful," she said. "They see everything. If they notice you're sparing him, it's worse for him and for you too." And then, more quietly: "But if you help him, then help him properly. Half helps no one. Half is only for your conscience, not for him."

August heard it and knew she was right, as she was always right. There were only two honest ways: to really help Tadeusz, with all the risk, perhaps to hide him, to help him flee, something great,

dangerous, whole. Or to do nothing and let the tool be a tool. Between the two lay only cowardice, the half-helping that calmed the conscience and did not save the man. And August, he sensed with a fright, was a man of the in-between, a man of the half things, and he feared the day when the in-between would no longer suffice, when he would have to choose, wholly, the way his father had once had to choose, and on which it would show whether he was made of different wood than Wilhelm or of exactly the same.

. . .

# Chapter 9 - Firedamp

The order came in February forty-four, and it came from the very top, through the directorate, over August, the way the pressure always came from above: the seam in the west field was to be worked, at once, fully, for the figure had to be met, cost what it might.

August knew the west field. It was firedamp-prone, always had been; the gas sat in the rock, the methane one neither smelled nor saw and which with a spark turned the gallery into a wall of fire. The ventilation there was poor, had been poor for months, because the material was lacking, the men were lacking, everything was lacking that the war devoured. A responsible overman would not have worked the seam, not so, not now. But a responsible overman who refused to carry out an order from above, in those years, was no overman any more and perhaps no free man any more.

August stood before the choice, and it was the same choice his father had stood before, only in a new garb: one's own against the others, one's own position, one's own safety, one's own family against the lives of men entrusted and delivered to him. He could have refused. He could have declared the seam unworkable, could have pointed to the gas, could have stalled, dodged, delayed the working, with all the risk to himself. Or he could at least have taken Tadeusz out, the one to whom he owed his life, assigned him to another gang, not sent him into the gas.

He did none of it. He carried out the order.

He did not even talk himself out of it long; that was the frightening thing, how quickly it went, as with his father in the counting house. He saw the list, he saw the west field, he divided up the gang, and Tadeusz's name stood among them, because Tadeusz was a good worker and good workers were needed in the difficult seam, and August did not strike him out. He would only have had to make one stroke, a single one, and set another name beneath it, and no one would have noticed. He did not make the stroke. Out of fear it would be noticed. Out of fear for the position. Out of cowardice, the old, inherited cowardice that set one's own above everything and told itself there was no choice.

There was a choice. There was always a choice. That was the truth August did not want to see and that would pursue him the rest of his life: that he could have acted otherwise and did not.

The gang rode down. August stayed up top; he had business in the supervision that day, he told himself, and it was true, and it was a pretext, both at once. Toward noon the firedamp came. One felt it first as a pressure, a thrust through the whole shaft, then the howl of the siren, then the faces of the men at the pit bottom, grey, and the word that ran through the installation like the gas through the gallery: firedamp in the west field.

They brought up what they could bring up. It was not much. The wall of fire had run through the gallery, and whoever had been in it had had no chance. They carried out the dead, one after another, blackened, contorted, and laid them on the yard, in a row, and August walked the row, because it was his duty to identify the dead of his district, and in the row lay Tadeusz.

August knelt down by him, the way Marlene had once knelt by her brother, the way his father had knelt by no one, because his father

had never seen the dead man. August saw him. He saw the face of the boy who had saved his life and whom he had sent to his death, one stroke, a single stroke, it would have cost to save him, and August had not made the stroke. And there, on the yard, before the other dead and the living men, August was sick, retched up the bile, bent over the dead Tadeusz, the same vomiting as his father after the strike night, thirty years earlier, at the still headframe. The body knew what the head talked itself out of. The body knew the truth and cast it out, and no excuse in the world helped against what the body knew.

The fault had changed the generation. What Wilhelm had done, August had repeated, not in the same form, but in the same truth: saved his own by letting another die, the one who had trusted him, the one to whom he owed everything. And as with the father, there would be no proof, no accusation, no court; it had only been an order, carried out, an accident, a war. No one would ever call August to account for it. Only he himself, every night, for the rest of his life, and the dead boy on the yard, who could no longer look at him and whom August would never stop seeing.

. . .

# Chapter 10 - The Bombs

The war, which had long been elsewhere, at fronts from which only the names of the fallen came home, now came itself to Voßlohe, out of the air. The district was a target, a great one: the pits, the coking plants, the blast furnaces, the heart of the armament, and the bombers came, first singly, then in streams, night after night, and laid over the coal town a fire hotter than any blast furnace.

The pit was target and refuge at once. When the sirens howled, the people ran to the shaft, for underground one was safe from the bombs, eight hundred metres of rock above, and so the mountain that had killed so many became the saviour, and the families crowded into the galleries, in the depths, and listened upward, where the earth shook under the impacts, and prayed the shaft would hold.

Lena sat with Marga and Jakob in the gallery, on one of those nights, crowded among other families, the shaking above her, the children pressed to her, Marga ten, Jakob six, and sang to them softly to drown out the howling, old songs that had nothing to do with the war, and the children fell asleep at her breast while above them the town burned.

Bertha was not with them.

The old woman had grown stubborn with the years, more stubborn than she had always been. She refused to run to the cellar every time the siren howled; she was too old to run, she said, and if it caught her, then it caught her, she had seen enough not to beg for every night any more. On that one night she went too late. The siren howled, and Bertha dawdled, fetched this and that, a stubbornness

that became her death, and when the bombs came she was still in the house, and the house took a hit, not a full one, but enough, and under the rubble they found in the morning old Bertha Kortmann, née Sczepanek, the Masurian immigrant's daughter who had held the colony's economy together through three wars and two inflations and a betrayal, and now she held nothing together any more.

August dug her out, with his own hands, between two shifts, for the winding ran on, now too, just now, coal for a war that was already lost and would not admit it. He had no time to mourn. He laid his mother in a coffin knocked together from the boards of another destroyed house, and buried her, and went to the next shift, and that was the mourning the war allowed: none.

Wilhelm outlived her. The old man, nearly seventy now, bent, half blind, outlived the woman who had carried everything with him, had carried the one thing no one else carried with him. For Bertha had been the only one who knew, or almost knew, of the strike night, of the going-off in the dark, of the betrayal she had never named and never forgiven and yet carried with him all her life. With her died the one who knew, the witness, the last before whom Wilhelm had not had to dissemble, because she knew everything anyway. Now he was alone with his betrayal, all alone, in a burning town, a blind old man who could no longer see the wheel and still heard it, day and night, the hum of the winding that did not stop, not even under the bombs.

"She knew it," said Wilhelm once in those days, to August, abruptly, confused perhaps with age and grief, and August did not understand what he meant.

"What did Mother know?"

But Wilhelm only looked at him with the half-blind eyes, and in the old face something worked, a sentence that wanted out and did

not come out, sixty years of silence that got a crack and yet held. "Nothing," said Wilhelm at last. "An old woman. She knew everything and said nothing. Like me. Like all of us." And he turned away, to the window that had no pane any more, out into the smoking town, and August put it down to age and grief and went to his shift, and over the bombed colony the wheel turned, indestructible, indifferent, and mined the coal for the last shells of a lost war.

. . .

# Chapter 11 - Collapse

In the spring of forty-five everything was over, the war, the Reich, the flag on the headframe, and it was an end without redemption, only exhaustion, rubble, silence where the howling of the sirens had been. The Americans came, then the British, who took over the district, and the Morgenstern pit lay half destroyed, partly flooded, the headframe damaged, the wheel still, this time not from strike and not from passive resistance, but from defeat.

There came the time of the questionnaires and the tribunals. The victors wanted to know who had been what, who had gone along and how far, and for a man like August, who had joined, who had worn the white shirt under the flag, who had carried out orders, it was a threatening time. Denazification was the word, and it decided over bread and position and sometimes over freedom. August's years as overman under the regime came onto the table, his membership, his responsibility, and August sat there and knew that of the worst thing he had done there stood nothing in any questionnaire, because it had been no crime by the letter, only an order, carried out, an accident, a stroke he had not made.

And then Otto Brass came back.

He came out of the camp, after twelve years, and he came as a shadow of the man he had been. They had not managed to kill him, but they had almost managed; he was emaciated, ill, his face of a gauntness that would never quite yield. But the eyes were the same, the eyes that feared nothing, and the spirit was unbroken, forged harder in the fire that had nearly consumed him. He was one of the

few Reds who came back, and he came with the moral weight of one who had been proved right and gone through hell for it.

The two lines stood facing each other again, after all the years. The son of the betrayed, hardened in the concentration camp, with all the moral right in the world. And the grandson of the traitor, August, the follower, the overman under the flag, who had sent a forced labourer to his death. It was as if history had set up the figures anew for a last reckoning, and all the power now lay with Otto, for Otto was now one to whom the victors listened, a persecuted man of the regime, a witness whose word counted, and August was one over whom judgement was passed.

They met on the street, in the first days after Otto's return. August saw the broken, upright man with the stick, and something in him wanted to dodge, to cross the street, to look away, the way he had always looked away. But Otto stopped and looked at him, and August could not dodge.

"Kortmann," said Otto. "You're still alive."

"I'm still alive," said August.

"Became overman. Under that lot." Otto looked him over, slowly, from top to bottom, with a gaze that knew everything or seemed to. "Your family has a talent for staying on top, no matter who rules below. My father said that too, right at the end. The Kortmanns, he said, they always swim on top. You only have to know which soup."

August was silent. He still did not know exactly what lay between Brass and Kortmann; his father had never told him. But he sensed that this man knew something about him and his family that he himself did not know, and that this man would now help decide his fate, before the tribunal, with a word that counted, while August's word counted nothing.

"We'll see each other before the tribunal," said Otto and walked on, leaning on the stick, and August stood and watched him go and knew that his fate now lay in the hand of a man whose family his own had destroyed, without August ever having learned how, and that history was preparing to settle an account whose entries he did not even know.

. . .

# Chapter 12 - Zero Hour

The winter of forty-six into forty-seven was colder than the turnip winter and hungrier, and the bitterest of it was that the town sat on the coal and froze. For the coal the district mined, as far as it mined at all, went to the victors, as reparation, hauled off in long trains, while the people who hewed it sat in unheated rooms and burned the wood of the bombed houses.

So the coal, which had always been the bread of the district, became currency and object of dispute. Whoever had coal had everything; one bartered it for bread, for bacon, for shoes. And whoever had none fetched it where he could, and that meant: from the trains. Coal-stealing they called it, and it was no longer a crime but a form of survival; half the town lived on it, on the coal one wrested from the moving or standing trains, with sacks, with baskets, with bare hands, in the dark, at risk of life.

Marga and Jakob were in the thick of it. Marga, twelve now, was nimble and fearless, and Jakob, eight, followed her everywhere. They climbed onto the standing wagons, threw the coal down, and Lena caught it below in the sack, and together they hauled home what they had snatched, and it was theft, and it was survival, and the boundary between had vanished in the winter of forty-seven like so many boundaries.

August was suspended. Until the tribunal had decided on him, he was not allowed to work as overman, and so he scraped by as a simple hewer, where they let him, or as a day-labourer clearing rubble, and the descent, which was as deep as his rise had been high,

humiliated him and freed him at once, in a strange way. For below, as a simple man, among simple men, August was nearer to what he had originally been, before the white shirt had set him apart from the others, and sometimes, clearing rubble, in the shared toil, he felt something of the old comradeship he had lost as overman, and it did good and hurt at once.

Lena held the family together, the way Bertha had once held the family together; the women carried the district through its catastrophes while the men mined or fought or sat before tribunals. She bartered, she foraged, she queued, she stretched the nothing into a meal, and she did it without complaint, with the stubbornness of the survivors.

One evening, when they all sat round the small stove into which the stolen coal went, Marga asked for the first time what had long occupied her.

"Father," she said. "At night you sometimes talk. In your sleep. You say a name."

August froze. "What sort of name."

"I don't quite understand it. Something foreign. And once you said: I'd only have had to make one stroke." Marga looked at him with Lena's straight gaze, the gaze that pretended nothing and accepted nothing. "What sort of stroke, Father?"

August looked at Lena, and Lena looked at him, and between them passed something, the same that had once passed between Wilhelm and Bertha, the knowledge and the silence. "Sleep, Marga," said August. "It's nothing. Old things. The war." And Marga did not sleep but laid the name and the stroke aside, the way one lays aside pieces of evidence, and Lena saw the daughter do it, and knew that the silence the Kortmanns passed on from generation to generation

had found in this girl a person who would not pass it on but break it open, one day, when the time was ripe. It would take long. But Marga forgot nothing, one saw that in her, and what she did not forget, she would one day bring to light.

. . .

# Chapter 13 - Before the Tribunal

The tribunal sat in the hall of the school the bombs had spared, and August sat on a chair before the long table behind which sat the men who would decide on him, and it was, he thought, a strange reversal: all his life he had sat behind the table, with the list, and decided over others, who rode down, who got which face, who had to go into the dangerous seam. Now he sat before it, and others had the list, and on the list stood he.

They read out what they knew about him. Joining the organisation. Promotion to overman under the regime. Responsibility for a district in which forced labourers were deployed. It sounded bad and was yet the usual; thousands of overmen in the district had done the same, and one could not punish them all, so one asked after the degree, after the more or less, after witnesses who said whether a man had been a slave-driver or only a follower who had carried out what everyone carried out.

And then they called Otto Brass.

August sat there and watched Otto step to the table, leaning on the stick, the persecuted man of the regime, whose word counted like no other, and August knew that this man could destroy him with a few sentences. Otto need only say what he thought of the Kortmann family, need only speak the old suspicion aloud, the betrayal of nineteen-five, need only throw his moral authority into the scale, and August was finished, not only as overman, but as a human being in this town.

Otto spoke. He spoke briefly, factually, without hatred, which was worse than hatred, because one could not dismiss factuality as vindictiveness. He said what he knew: that Kortmann had been an overman, a member, a man of the supervision. He said it soberly, without embellishing and without exaggerating. And then, when the chairman asked whether August had been a particularly hard, a particularly zealous representative of the regime, one who had done more than ordered, Otto paused, long, and August held his breath.

A witness stepped forward whom August did not know, a woman who had worked in the camp during the war, one of the few survivors of there, and she testified about the woman Kortmann, about Lena, who had passed bread over the fence, secretly, at risk of life, bread for the starving, and that it had been known in the camp that bread came from the house of Kortmann, and that in those years that had been more than a piece of bread, that it had been a sign, that not all Germans were beasts.

Otto heard that, and it changed something in his face. He could have passed over the woman's testimony, could have stuck with the incriminating. Instead he said, and it visibly cost him something to say it: "If the woman gave bread, then she risked more than most here in this room. And if bread comes from a house, then not everything in that house is rotten." He looked at August. "I have nothing in hand against August Kortmann that would make him a slave-driver. He was a follower like a hundred thousand others. No better. But no worse either."

It was no defence. It was a bitter justice, a truth, no more and no less, and it sufficed for survival, not for acquittal. The tribunal classified August as a follower, with a fine, with a ban on leading posts that lapsed after a few years. August was allowed to stay,

allowed to work again, allowed to go on living in Voßlohe. His civic life was saved, by his wife's bread and his enemy's truthfulness.

After the session, in the corridor, Otto stepped to him once more. They stood alone, the betrayed man's son and the follower, and Otto looked at him, long, and said quietly, only for August: "I told the truth today, Kortmann, no more. The truth helped you, this time. But don't confuse it with forgiveness. Your guilt I do not take from you. That you must carry yourselves, you Kortmanns. Your father, you, your children. Until one of you has the courage to speak it." He leaned on the stick and went, and August stayed in the corridor, survived, saved, and more heavily laden than before, for now he knew there was a guilt greater than his own, a family guilt that reached back to the father and further, and that Otto Brass knew it and he, August, did not, and that he would have to fathom it before he could carry it.

. . .

# Chapter 14 - Coal is Bread

Reconstruction began underground, for without coal nothing went, and so the district became again the heart of the country that rose from the rubble. Coal is bread, ran the slogan now, and it was truer than ever: every ton mined was a piece of reconstruction, a piece of future, and the miners, who had just been followers or persecuted or simply survivors, were needed as never before, and being needed gave them something back, a meaning, a pride.

They drained the flooded pit, repaired the headframe, the wheel turned again, and August rode down again, as a simple hewer first, for the ban forbade him the overman's post, and he was glad of it. He had had enough of the white shirt. He wanted to stand at the face, man against rock, in the honest weight of the work that did not lie, that demanded nothing but strength and no decisions over human lives. Underground, at the face, August was almost happy, as far as a man with a dead boy on his conscience could be happy.

The union was founded anew, the Mining Industrial Union, free again, as once the Old Union, for which Heinrich Brass had fought. And it won something that had never existed: co-determination, a word Heinrich could only have dreamed of, that the workers might have a say in the supervisory boards, that the mines no longer belonged to the gentlemen alone. It was not the revolution Otto had dreamed of, not the socialisation, but it was more than the district had ever possessed, and it was, in a way, a late, half victory of those who had lost in nineteen-five, a victory Heinrich did not live to see and Otto, broken, watched with bitter satisfaction.

In those years of reconstruction Wilhelm died.

He died at a great age, nearly blind, in bed, in the makeshift-patched room, and he died slowly, over weeks, and August sat with him, as often as he could, between shifts. The old man talked much in those last weeks, confused often, of things long past, of Bertha, of the strike, of names August did not know. And once, quite clearly all at once, in a lucid moment, Wilhelm reached for August's hand and said: "August. There is something you must know. About me. About the house. How I became overman, back then. It was not—"

And then his strength left him, or his courage, or both, and the lucid moment passed, and Wilhelm sank back and said: "It was not right. Much was not right." And no more came. The sentence he had not said for sixty years stayed unfinished even now, at the edge of death, the way it had stayed unfinished at the edge of the shaft when August first rode down. Wilhelm Kortmann died with his betrayal, almost whole, the way Marlene Aregger would one day die with hers in another valley, and took the essential with him, and left behind only the fault, unnamed, inherited.

August buried the father beside the mother, and at the grave he thought of Wilhelm's last words, it was not right, much was not right, and he did not quite understand them and sensed all the same that they aimed at something greater than the usual, that every old man regrets in the end. And he inherited, without knowing it, the father's silence, completely; he laid it over his own children, the way Wilhelm had laid it over him, not out of malice but because he knew no other way, because silence was the mother tongue of the Kortmanns, inherited from generation to generation, and only Marga, who forgot nothing, who had heard the father speak of a stroke at

night, only Marga already carried in her the seed of what would one day break the silence.

. . .

# Chapter 15 - Marga Among the Men

Marga was fourteen when the war was four years over, and she was different from the other girls of the colony, and everyone knew it, and not everyone liked it. She was clever, cleverer than her brother, cleverer than most of the boys, and she was curious in a way one did not like to see in girls. She wanted to know. How things hung together, why it was as it was, what lay behind the words and beneath the silence that filled her father's house.

Above all she wanted to go down. That was the impossible thing about Marga: that she, a girl, was drawn to the mountain like her brother, like her father, like all the men of the family. She hung about the headframe the way August had hung about it as a boy, knew the shift times, plagued the hewers with questions about what happened below, about the seams, the roadways, the old man. But for Marga there was no cage. Women did not ride down. That was law, old, iron law, as old as mining itself: a woman in the shaft brings ill luck, it was said, and whether one believed it or not, the law held, and Marga stood at the pit gate she would never be allowed to pass through, and watched the men ride down and ride up, and in her burned an anger that never quite faded.

"Why am I not allowed," she asked her mother. "Jakob is, and he's younger and dumber."

"Because you're a girl," said Lena.

"That's no reason. That's only how it is."

Lena looked at her daughter, and in her gaze there was pride and worry at once. "You're right," she said, which mothers seldom said.

"It's no reason. It's only how it is. And it won't change as long as you live, Marga. You'll never ride down. But" — and she laid her hand on the daughter's shoulder — "perhaps that's not the worst. Those down below see the mountain. You, from above, you see everything else. You see who rides down and who doesn't, who wears which shirt, who won't look whom in the eye. Sometimes the one standing outside sees more than the one inside."

It was a comfort and it was true, and Marga remembered it, the way she remembered everything. She stayed outside, at the gate, and she saw. She saw the feud between the families, the not-greeting on Sundays, the cold looks. She saw that the Brasses did not greet the Kortmanns, and she asked herself why, and no one told her, and the untold provoked her more than any information. She saw her father talk at night, of a stroke, of a foreign name. She saw her grandfather die with an unfinished sentence. She gathered it all, laid it aside, piece of evidence by piece of evidence, in the patience of one who knows the time will come when the pieces make a picture.

Jakob, by contrast, asked nothing. Jakob, now eleven, wanted only one thing: to go down, to become a hewer, like the father, like the grandfather. He was no brooder; he was a doer, sturdy, loyal, straightforward, and for him the world was simple because he wanted it simple. The old family story did not interest him; what was past was past. He would become the dutiful son who continued the tradition, who rode down, was a good butty, and who lived with the silence without ever touching it, because touching brought nothing and only hurt.

So the siblings divided the inheritance of silence between two ways, the way the inheritances in this family always divided: the one, Jakob, would carry it on, untouched, into the mountain, into duty,

into the lived comradeship that did not ask. The other, Marga, would one day break it open, because she could not do otherwise, because she forgot nothing, because from outside she saw everything. And between the two, the keeper and the breaker, would be decided what became of the fault a grandfather had laid one warm night in the counting house half a century before.

. . .

# Chapter 16 - The Currency Reform

In June forty-eight the new money came, overnight, as once the Rentenmark after the inflation, a new beginning out of nothing. Everyone got forty marks, head money, the same for all, for the hewer as for the director, and the day after the shop windows were full, which had stood empty for months, full of goods that suddenly existed again, as if they had only been held back for this day. It was a miracle and a swindle at once, for the old money, which people had laboriously saved, was with a stroke of the pen worth almost nothing, and whoever had had real assets won, and whoever had saved lost, as always.

For August it was a second beginning, and he took it the way one takes a beginning at his age: weary, without great hope, but resolved to make the best of it for the children. The ban would soon lapse, he could become overman again if he wanted, and the prosperity that would come, one already sensed it, the economic miracle the newspapers wrote of, would reach Voßlohe too, would overgrow the wounds of the war with new prosperity, new houses, new cars.

But August had aged early. The dead boy in the west field had taken years from him that no economic miracle gave back. He still rode down, still stood at the face, but the lung grew worse, the dust took its toll, and sometimes, when he lay awake at night and coughed, he thought of Tadeusz and of the stroke he had not made, and of Otto's words in the corridor: your guilt I do not take from you.

One evening that summer August went down alone, one last time, into a roadway they meant to abandon, worked out, marked for

sealing. It was not his task; he went out of an urge he could not explain. He stood before the place they would wall up, before the dark hole behind which lay the old man, the worked-out, abandoned district that one gave back to the mountain, and he stood before it the way his father had once stood before it, without August knowing it, for the father had never told him.

And August thought: here I could leave it. The dead boy, the guilt, the stroke. Here, behind the wall, in the dark, give it back to the mountain. But he knew it did not work. The old man in the mountain let itself be sealed. The old man in a person did not. That one lived, behind its wall, and pressed, and the water rose.

The next day, when Marga brought him his food, August sat on the house bench in the evening sun, and he looked at the daughter, the fourteen-year-old who forgot nothing, who had heard the father speak of a stroke at night, and something in him wanted to speak. He felt that she was the only one who could one day carry it, not because she was stronger, but because she looked, because she asked, because the silence did not choke her as it did the others.

"Marga," he said. "You asked me about a stroke. In my sleep."

She went quite still and sat down beside him.

"There was a boy," said August. "In the war. Underground. One who saved my life. And I—" He faltered. The sun stood low over the colony's roofs, and the wheel turned, and August felt the sentence rise in him, the whole sentence this time, the truth about the stroke, about the west field, about the looking-away that had become a deed. And behind it, darker, older, dimly sensed, the other truth, the one he did not himself quite know, the truth about the father, about the house, about the guilt that reached back further than his own failure.

"I—," he said once more, and then he broke off. It was too big. It was too heavy. And Marga was too young, he told himself, fourteen, a child still, one must not lay such a thing on a child. It was a pretext, and a part of him knew it, the old Kortmann pretext, rather bury the heavy than speak it.

"Ah, nothing," said August. "Old things. The war. Eat, the food's getting cold."

Marga looked at him, long, with Lena's straight gaze, and she let it go. But she did not let it drop; she laid it to the other pieces, the father's broken sentence to the grandfather's broken sentence, and in her there formed slowly, over the years, a picture, still incomplete, that she would one day complete. Over the colony the sun went down, the economic miracle began, the prosperity would come, and deep in the mountain, behind two walled-up roadways, behind the old man of the first and the second generation, the water rose slowly, patient, and waited for a time in which someone would have the courage to open the walls.

## Über dieses Buch

*The Seam - At the Face*
Ein Schreib-Experiment von aban news, Kapitel für Kapitel mit Claude Opus verfasst und redigiert.
Riedmatt, der Stausee und alle Figuren sind erfunden; Ähnlichkeiten mit realen Orten oder Personen sind Zufall.