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Theresa Hannig

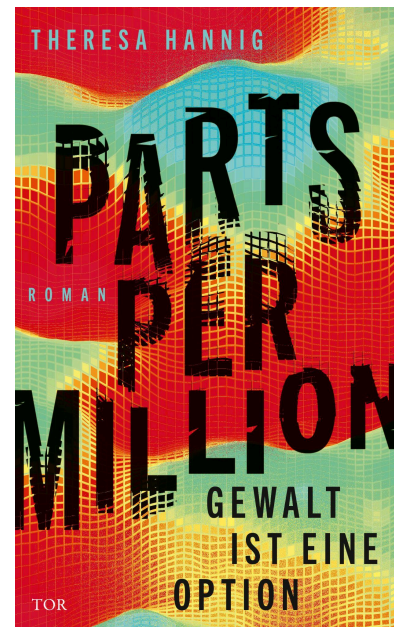
Parts Per Million

September 2024 . 384 pages

The battle for the future has only just begun

Johanna Stromann is trying to write a novel about climate activists. But the research proves to be dangerous: the state is trying to suppress the protests, using violence if need be. Soon Johanna can't stay uninvolved any longer. More than that: she thinks the protesters aren't going far enough.

Having witnessed the banning of many climate groups and the sentencing of their members, she and the remaining activists found the Parts Per Million initiative to hold the perpetrators of the climate disaster accountable. By any means necessary.



'The most intense book I've read in a long time. Anyone who doesn't think about climate change afterwards is probably dead.' Andreas Eschbach

Theresa Hannig, born in 1984, studied political science and worked as a software developer, project manager and lighting designer before turning to writing full-time. Since then, she has been honoured with numerous awards, including the Seraph for her novel Pantopia. In 2023, she received the Tassilo Culture Prize from the Süddeutsche Zeitung. In her novels, short stories and the *taz* column 'Über Morgen', she writes about future topics such as AI, data protection, climate change and the future of work. Hannig lives in Fürstenfeldbruck with her husband and two children.

Synopsis:

The novel begins with an everyday scene: some younger activists are obstructing traffic, and after talking to them, the writer Johanna Stromann decides to set her next novel in this ambience. She meets the veteran activist Markus and visits a protest camp in Hamburg, witnessing political action. Impressed by Markus and the others, she returns to Munich.

A few weeks later, she and her daughter attend a climate rally, where she sees, at close range, a young woman being killed by the police. After a fight with her husband who believes it was irresponsible to endanger the life of their daughter by taking her to the rally, she decides to leave her family for a few weeks to do further research in Berlin, where she visits Markus and some activists from the protest camp.

After a rally in Munich gets out of hand, the climate movement is criminalised and is now starting to regroup underground. After many discussions and a period of despair, Johanna and some fellow activists found an organisation called "Parts per Million" (PPM), which is to advance its cause through sabotage and direct action.

The activists begin to radicalize; there is talk of violence. Johanna leaves the active movement and is not supposed to get in touch with it again but only to support it by writing her book. She cannot contact anyone any longer; the activists go underground in small groups and disappear from sight. Shortly after Johanna arrives in Munich, the family's apartment is searched by the police, who have reason to believe that she is part of a terrorist climate activist network. Her husband blames her and moves in with his parents, leaving his frightened daughter behind. After a breakdown, Johanna finally makes a decision.

She borrows a friend's car and drives to France: she knows that some environmental activists in one of the ZADs (zone à défendre) there are in touch with someone at the PPM. It is difficult to make contact, but she succeeds. As part of an active cell, Johanna is now at the centre of climate resistance. Their actions are becoming increasingly radical and dangerous.

The first of their two essential projects is building an internet portal to finance sabotage in Germany via anonymous microtransactions and global coordination. Secondly, the activists are planning to beat up particularly aggressive industrial and right-wing climate offenders and to stream the violent scenes. The climax is reached when the group manages to attack the acting Minister of Economic Affairs, a member of the right-wing AfD party.

The attack, planned by an originally peaceful activist named Zoe, ends with a bang: streaming live, Zoe shoots herself in the head. She has grown desperate and believes the only chance to achieve something is by making the only sacrifice she can – taking her own life.

Afterwards, the group disbands, and some members are arrested. Johanna turns herself in, while the Neurath lignite power plant is being shattered by an explosion organised via the internet platform she had developed.

Sample Translation: Alexandra Berlina

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For those who are still hoping.

For those who've lost all hope.

For us.

Temperature records are being shattered in countries across Asia as a brutal April heat wave continues to grip large portions of the continent, with little relief in sight.

(CNN, 19 April)

Article 20

[Constitutional principles – Right of resistance]

(1) The Federal Republic of Germany is a democratic and social federal state.

(2) All state authority is derived from the people. It shall be exercised by the people through elections and other votes and through specific legislative, executive and judicial bodies.

(3) The legislature shall be bound by the constitutional order, the executive and the judiciary by law and justice.

(4) All Germans shall have the right to resist any person seeking to abolish this constitutional order if no other remedy is available.

Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, article 20

The protection of life and physical integrity under Article 2 (2) sentence 1 of the Basic Law includes protection against impairment of fundamental rights by environmental pollution, regardless of who is responsible and under what circumstances the threat arises.

The state's duty to protect, which follows from Article 2 (2) sentence 1 of the Basic Law, also includes the obligation to protect life and health from the dangers of climate change. It can also establish an objective legal obligation to protect with regard to future generations.

Federal Constitutional Court, 24 March 2021

Chapter 1

It's a scorching hot day in mid-April when my car's air conditioning decides to pack up and die. Cursing, I keep pushing buttons and turning the controls, but to no avail. Nothing but hot air comes out. At once, I'm bathed in sweat. And while I'm sweating, waiting at a red light, and rummaging in the glove compartment for the air conditioner's instructions, five people dressed in orange safety vests cross the road in front of me, stop halfway across, and unfurl a banner that reads: "Gas is not a solution." Below, a crossed-out pictogram of a building with a smoking chimney. I'm confused at first, but then my gaze moves upwards, past the demonstrators. We are facing the Munich North combined heat and power plant, previously coal-fired, recently converted to gas, and now about to be expanded further. Apparently not everyone is happy with this plan.

The lights turn green. My car is standing still. Behind me, people start honking their horns. I turn off the engine and watch. What happens now? Should I call the police? Will the others? The demonstrators are sitting down on the asphalt. To the right and left of the banner, they hold cardboard signs saying "There is no planet B" and "+ 2 degrees = mass extinction."

In my side-view mirror, I can see three men walking past the queue of waiting cars and toward the activists, talking to them, at them, but they don't budge.

"Well, I'm calling the police now." A grey-haired man takes out his phone.

"You better don't, just leave it to us," says another man. He's wearing white work overalls and a jacket proudly proclaiming his official diploma in house painting along with his name, Malermeister Kuhn. "The police would will take ages. We'll all be still here tomorrow."

"But at least these people will be locked up and there won't be another roadblock tomorrow," says a third man, who looks like an office worker.

"I don't give a flying fuck what they do tomorrow! I must be at the construction site in twenty minutes. If I'm not on time, I'll get in trouble with my

customers, and the apprentices will think they can get away with anything. So, are you going to help me or what?" The other two hesitate, then nod. The painter turns back to the seating protesters and yells "pay attention, you fuckers! Either you piss off right now or I'll make you! Is that clear?"

The activists stare ahead in silence, holding on to their placards.

"All right, you asked for it," says the painter. He nods to his two freshly found fellow vigilantes and grabs an activist by the arm. Together, the three drag him to the emergency lane, then onto the sparse grass by the side.

The office worker tears the sign out of his hand and throws it down the embankment like a frisbee. The young man doesn't resist.

"Well, that wasn't so hard, was it," says the painter. But while the three of them drag away a woman who's been holding one corner of the largest banner, the first activist gets back up and takes her place. The painter whirls around and yells: "What do you think you're doing, you piece of shit, stay put or you've got something else coming!" The activist just stares ahead. He pretends not to notice the painter, but I can see his eyes flickering. He is afraid alright, but sticking to his plan.

I unbuckle my seat belt and just as I'm getting out of the car, the painter's fist comes down on the activist's temple. The young man's eyes roll upwards, and he falls. The other demonstrators scream. The man with the second cardboard sign rushes to his comrade's aid, and the painter uses this to push him off the road. More and more people are getting out of their cars. Without ever explicitly making a plan, they grab the activists by the arms and legs and drag them onto the grass. The protesters plead but there is no physical resistance. A woman who's been waiting a few metres away is filming the scene. As the painter sees this, he strides towards her and tries to grab her smartphone. But she is quicker. She turns around and runs past the waiting cars.

"Get her, she's one of them!" the painter shouts, and sure enough, someone opens a car door, hitting the young woman hard; she drops to the ground. The driver jumps out and kicks her with his boots. The phone also gets a kick and shatters.

“Very good,” the painter calls triumphantly, holding a thumb up. Then he turns back to the other activists, who are being beaten up by drivers so close to me, there, on that dusty grass. It’s all so quick, so brutal that I feel paralysed. I can’t do anything but watch. At some point, the drivers seem satisfied enough and go back to their cars.

The painter is standing on the verge now, waving the cars through. They honk and jeer as they circle past me. I’m still standing in the open car door, holding on to the frame.

The people driving past me shake their heads or give me the finger. When the traffic light turns red again, I find myself walking to the verge.

“If you sit down there now, you’ll get a punch in the face, no two ways about that,” the painter hisses.

Such hatred burns in his eyes that I stop dead in my tracks. I see his clenched fist and have no doubt that he’d carry out his threat. Behind him, the activists are huddled together, on the ground, arm in arm. They look so young, hardly older than my daughter Finja. Together, they could easily overpower the painter, but they remain where they are, shocked, just as I am, or probably more, crying, gasping, spitting blood into the dry grass. Why are they doing this? Why did they decide to sit down in the street on a scorching hot morning and let themselves be beaten up by angry motorists? I feel impressed. Where do they get the courage? The determination? I see them, and the first sentences of a story start forming in my mind.

[...]

Chapter 15

Choking heat: up to 44 degrees in Spain
(ZEIT ONLINE, 9 August)

Tallin, Paris and Bill arrive at the same time as Rita, all of them greeting me warmly. Smudge is there, too, which makes me extra happy. Otis gives me an inscrutable, dark look, then nods at me and grumbles a greeting. When Isar comes in, we hug at once, and for some reason, I find myself crying – but I

don't feel embarrassed as she, too, is crying, and laughing at the same time. The last to come through the door is Zoe. We both hesitate, I awkwardly hold out my hand, she hugs me. It's not a fleeting greeting but a real embrace. I feel confused, try to break free, but she hugs me even tighter. Then she takes a step back, looks at me and says: "Thank you for being here. I'm sorry I didn't trust you."

"Okay... Thanks." For a moment, I stay behind in the hallway, lost, while Zoe joins the others in the living room. Isar turns to me and makes a silent wide-eyed grimace. I raise my hands in a helpless gesture and mouth "no idea".

Rita comes in laden with bakery bags, and I'm amused at the idea of an illegal organisation discussing the best strategy for saving the world over rolls and donuts. Soon enough, though, my amusement vanishes: the topics at hand are not funny in the least.

The media coverage of the Hackerbrücke rally was extremely tendentious. The responsibility for the escalation of violence was attributed to the climate movement. The police arrested dozens of activists and took many more into custody. The Bavarian Ministry of the Interior urged that all remaining climate protection groups be banned nationwide. According to its official argumentation, innocent bystanders were harmed at climate protection events. How could a good person support a movement that accepted the risk of injuries through violent riots?

Isar reads out some of the headlines that I had missed in my self-imposed isolation. Quite a few of them mention me – as an activist or at least a sympathiser. My books also came under scrutiny; the right-wing liberal and conservative media described them as products of dangerous, subversive left-wing wokeness. Artistic freedom is all nice and well, they suggested, but if I planned to heroize climate terrorists in my next book, I could easily find myself officially accused of incitement to hatred.

Furthermore, they wrote that Germany had no use for a new extremist Red – or rather, Green – Army Fraction, that all these anarchists really only wanted attention, which they'd use on social media to generate money, this is, to take it from the pockets of hard-working citizens. Climate change was a

challenge that was being addressed at the EU level and within the framework of international partnerships, they wrote. Propagating a German solo effort was counterproductive. First and foremost, the biggest global polluters, such as China and India, should be held responsible. Germany produced only two per cent of the global emissions, so why should Germany of all countries take a course that would endanger its economy and prosperity? The ministries of economics, the environment and the interior had decided to continue exporting German coal-fired power plant technology to less developed countries so that the German standard would contribute to sustainable climate protection. Ultimately, all climate terror organisations would be stopped, the newspapers promised. Thanks to many well-planned raids, the public order was restored. German cars would continue to move safely on German roads! As for ecology – other countries could learn a thing or two from Germany's exemplary climate policy.

Nobody says a word after Isar has finished. Otis pretend to retch. Finally, Marcus brings the group back to the present moment.

"Well now. What shall we do?" he asks.

"We can't rally," says Smudge. Everyone nods.

"We won't get a permit for anything at all now, and if we try another sit-in in the road, they'll arrest us and lock us up," says Rita.

"We could join a French ZAD. There are still quite a few out there that are active: ZAD du Lys, ZAD port d'escale, ZAD Hibou... In Hibou, I actually know a few people," says Paris.

"What's a ZAD?" I ask.

"Zone à défendre," she explains. "Occupied areas, like back in Lützerath or in the Hambach Forest. In Germany, the last of these were cleared last year. But in France, people seem more resilient. They don't give up so easily. Maybe we can't do a whole lot there, but we'd be among friends and safe."

"I don't want to hole up in some camp in France," Otis growls.

"These are pretty tough people, though!" Paris is clearly warming to her own idea now. "They've been living there for years, sometimes decades. They've tried out a lot, they can share some ideas."

Otis huffs. "That's all well and good, but we need action here in Germany. Our government couldn't care less if cars are burning or some zones are being occupied in France. As long as no German companies or citizens are affected..."

"Ideally, we only need 3.5 per cent of the population to join us to create a turnaround," says Marcus. "But we don't even have that. And with the current media situation, we aren't getting more support any time soon... Besides, even if a thousand sympathisers came to join us every day – which is not happening – it would take us eight years to reach the critical mass."

"So what? Giving up? Great plan," says Tallin. She is fiddling with her necklace, pressing it into her fingers. I can see the marks of the links on her skin.

"No, of course not. But we shouldn't nurture any illusions about the kind of influence we currently have," says Marcus.

"The problem", Bill interjects, "is that our actions so far have attracted the attention of the press, but not the right kind. We don't have popular support. The Last Generation's roadblocks, for example. They completely antagonised people instead of mobilising them. Everyone hated the whole thing. If you try another sit-in, you shouldn't be surprised if you get beaten up. Or run over."

"Well thank you so very much," Zoe snarks.

"He's right," says Otis. "Nowadays, if the police turn up at a protest, it's only to lock you up. If ten people who really care about the movement try a sit-in, it means ten people fewer for the movement, what with months in prison and the staggering fines. I mean, who can afford to support us? Not a person! As long as we are considered a criminal organisation, only radicals will dare join us."

"I don't think so," says Zoe. "We know that peaceful protest has a better chance of success than violence. It's scientifically proven that peaceful resistance – "

"In the past, maybe. When you could just go out into the street, and the masses protected you. And afterwards, you could go home in peace. Now, even if they don't arrest you on the spot, you're still in danger. Once you've been photographed at a rally, they'll run the pictures through some image recognition software, and a week later you get a summons," says Paris.

"They can't lock everyone up!" Zoe again, of course.

"They don't have to," says Rita. "With every moderate supporter who is arrested and put in custody. you scare off hundreds who'd otherwise join us."

"Exactly," Tallin joins in bitterly. "The country has stopped being truly democratic quite a while ago. People don't even notice because the state has been spreading its tentacles everywhere so gradually. It keeps happening, and nobody shouts stop! Remember, it started with the tougher police laws in Bavaria? First, preventive custody without a warrant, then increasing police violence, then the raids and surveillance. If the public prosecutor's office calls us a criminal organisation often enough, at some point the word gets stuck in people's minds. And the courts confirm it. And then – special tribunals. The gagging of the press. This last one isn't even necessary any longer. With the current laws, no journalist will dare to write about us. They'd at once be brandished as a sympathiser and an inciter of hatred."

"Paragraph 129, the one on criminal organisations, was intended from the outset to silence political opposition," says Bill. "Actually, it goes back to a 1798 edict, which was meant to prevent Prussians from imitating the French Revolution. So it's only logical to use it against us. Unfortunately, the population is not aware of its history..."

"Yep. That's why Johanna is here." Marcus throws me a glance.

All eyes are on me now. Overwhelmed, I give the group an awkward grin. Fortunately, Marcus continues: "Johanna is writing about us. She can tell the stories that journalists no longer dare to. She can get us the attention we need and change public opinion."

"Let's be realistic," I say.

"Yeah, she's right. I mean, who reads novels these days anyway?" I try to hide my hurt feelings at Otis's remark. "Let's forget about my book for now," I say. "What else do you have up your sleeve besides things you can't do anymore because they'd get you arrested, like rallying and roadblocking?"

"Well, we've shut down a few pipelines for a while," says Paris. She doesn't look particularly impressed with this achievement, though.

"The problem is: even if you manage a real feat, no newspaper will report on it. At least not in a positive manner. And your profiles on social media are blocked, right?", I ask.

"Right. And yes, no German newspaper writes neutrally about us anymore, much less positively. If there is a story, like the one about the rally, they only use the material the police gives them. As for international media... I don't know many Germans who read The Guardian. Most prefer the local tabloids," says Smudge.

Everyone is silent. If these are Germany's most promising climate activists, then things are looking pretty bleak.

"If what we do is drastic enough, the media will have to report," says Otis. Again, silence. Everyone knows what he's getting at. I glance over at Zoe. She doesn't contradict him. And then, I speak up.

"I think the problem is that you aren't selling your product well." Eight pairs of eyes look at me with equal scepticism. But I have to go on now that I've started.

"We live in an attention economy, don't we? All the TV channels, all the social media, everyone is constantly competing for attention. And you only get it if you offer the audience hope. If you make a promise. People want to get something in exchange for their time. Beauty, health, wealth. Climate activism isn't selling anything except for a bad conscience and renunciation. It's damn unsexy."

"What should we selling, then?" asks Smudge.

"Nothing!" Marcus exclaims. "That's capitalist nonsense. Life isn't only about consumption."

I shake my head. My mind is a hodgepodge of stories, experiences, and advertising strategies for my books that I'd never had enough money to realise.

"Emotional involvement," I say.

Again, nothing but incomprehension in their faces.

"Well, your cause is just, and it matters for everyone. Actually, you have the best product imaginable to sell: survival. Agreed so far?" A few grunts and nods.

"But the way you've been selling your story so far is a story of renunciation. Besides, nobody can dedicate their whole life to activism. Well, except for the people in this room maybe; you really burn for the cause. But think of a single mother, or a father who works hard all day in the office to pay the rent. They don't have the energy to consider what will happen in ten years' time."

"We're not talking about ten years anymore, the climate catastrophe is already here!" says Zoe. But that's not the point now.

"People get used to gradual change, they begin to think everything is still normal, that the real disaster is still far away. Most people are so caught up in their daily lives that they are just relieved to come home in the evening and relax a bit. They no longer have the stamina for complicated truths. It's easier to believe those who tell them that things aren't so bad. And if there are any problems, they think, then their future selves will take care."

"But that's nonsense!" Rita exclaims. "Their future selves will have to live with the consequences. With droughts, with water rationing, with refugees. Soon, there will be millions more. Every day wasted by doing nothing makes things harder, more complicated, and more expensive."

"Yes, yes, I know! But you can't get that across. You're competing with Netflix and TikTok and the special offer on bratwurst at Lidl."

"Capitalism has lulled people into a stupor," says Marcus, resigned.

"Yes, and the real problem is: they don't know it. To most people, the current system is the normal state of affairs, it seems natural to them. They don't know any different, so they can't even imagine living in another system."

"Without capitalism, there is no economic growth, no pensions or security..." says Bill thoughtfully.

"Exactly. People love their privileges so much that they consider them rights. They don't know any different. If you try to take that away from them, you are the bad guys," says Isar.

"People just need to know the facts, then they'll realise things can't go on like this," says Zoe.

"No!" Marcus contradicts sharply. "Most people don't want to face reality. Facts and reason won't help here. They do know what's happening. It's just that they see no way out, so they prefer to repress reality rather than face it."

To face reality would mean admitting that they are part of the problem. That they – rather than despotic states or criminal foreigners – are the evil force. That doesn't sit well with their arrogant fantasies, the rule of law and all that... They have no interest in recognising the truth. That would mean having to deal with painful solutions. We live in a society of repression."

"Exactly. And you can say this here, among us. But you can't explain things like that to your average hard-working citizen."

That was me again, of course.

"Hard-working my bum," mutters Bill.

"Oh God. It's all hopeless," Isar sighs.

"We must educate people!" says Marcus. "Get the major social players, the churches, the associations, the clubs on our side... The climate discourse must reach into all areas of life. It's not just a topic for activists. At some point people will understand."

"No!" My voice is so loud that the others flinch. Still, I proceed.

"We don't have the time for that. And we don't have the political system for that, either. You can't vote on minority rights in a fascist state. You can't negotiate over women's bodies in a patriarchal society. You can't discuss religious freedom in a theocracy. Some systems can no longer be reformed from within."

"Well, well, well. Our little writer is a dyed-in-the-wool activist now!" says Otis and grins as he bites into his nut roll.

"Yes, damn it! But why the hell am I the one explaining this stuff to you? Where's your enthusiasm? Where's your revolutionary zeal? Where are your plans for overthrowing the government? Aren't you supposed to be the terror of bureaucrats, managers and other old white men?"

"Well, we do have a few ideas," says Tallin. "But Marcus hasn't been particularly enthusiastic about them so far." Smudge nods in agreement.

"Bring it on!" I say. Zoe snorts and leans back with her arms crossed. "We are peaceful protesters. Only peaceful movements have a chance in the 21st century," she says.

"She happens to be right, you know," says Marcus.

"Round and round it goes." Rita rolls her eyes.

"Dearest Marcus – " I lean across the table towards him. "I remember a speaker who said that we must take up the fight now. On all fronts, for the whole system is our enemy. I don't remember exactly, but I think his name might have been..."

"Marcus!" Bill points at him with feigned astonishment.

"Exactly. We should get down and consider our alternatives. My book will sell like shit if it reads: 'So they sat down in the street and were then all locked up for five years. Humanity wiped itself out by the end of the century. The End.'"

"Never mind your fucking book!" snaps Zoe. "It's the movement that matters."

"Oh really?" I slowly raise an eyebrow. "I thought it was the climate that mattered."

She clicks her tongue and turns away, shaking her head. Otis grins, Paris looks back and forth between us in confusion. Tallin stares into space, fiddling with her pendant. Marcus does his best to keep a poker face. The others avoid my gaze.

I think of the megaphone on the tracks. Once, I missed my chance. It won't happen again. Here are the people, here is the potential. Everyone at this table knows more people, has friends, supporters, a network. It's more than just one person throwing stones. It's more than just Rita, who organises conspiratorial food transports, or Tallin and Smudge, who hack companies, or Isar, who sits on the tracks. There are hundreds, maybe even thousands, who'd follow. It's just a question of whether we dare to speak up, to change strategies, and inspire others.

How could things go on from here? I can only see two scenarios. Returning home to lead a life of supposed normality. Or risking everything. I decide to speak, and it feels as if I was holding that megaphone.

"First of all, we need a new name," I say. "New product, new brand, new name. What do you say?"

"How about Climate Warriors?" Bill suggests. The others grumble, unimpressed.

"Grass Root Avengers!" says Paris. Isar sniggers.

"Do you have a better idea?" Paris snaps.

"Climate Killers?" says Isar.

"Please..." Zoe groans.

"I'd go with Green Guerilla," says Rita.

"The alliteration is quite nice for TV and stuff, but do you really want to read it in a serious press release?" asks Tallin.

"We need something catchy that hasn't been used a thousand times," says Smudge.

"Or maybe something that has been used a thousand times, only in a different meaning!" All at once, I have an idea. "Look at us: we are a small group that's fighting not just for ourselves but for millions. Almost a guerrilla group, yes, a grassroots movement, in any case. We want to achieve a big impact with small actions. And in this, we are like CO₂ for the climate. You only need a few parts to make the system collapse. At first, people don't notice. And when the effect has become too great, they can no longer stop it."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"Isn't clear yet? We are the Parts Per Million!"

Later, Rita, Otis, and Bill leave. Isar and Paris have retreated to the kitchen to work out an action plan, while Smudge and Tallin are sitting on the couch registering a few domains. To my astonishment, Zoe has not stormed off in a rage but is pacing restlessly around the apartment. When Marcus withdraws to the bedroom to make a phone call, she says:

"I didn't think you'd have such an influence on the group."

"Why?"

"When I saw you in Hamburg, I thought you were just there to do research and collect material. Now it seems to me as if you wanted to take over."

"No, of course not! But a lot has changed since Hamburg. I can't just sit around and do nothing anymore. It drives me crazy! At home, I feel like I'm buried. Everyone knows what's going on, but no one is doing anything about it. It's like being underwater, trying to reach the surface and being pulled back down from below. The more ignorance I see, the more everything boils inside me. Isn't that how you feel, too?"

"Sure."

"And yet you still want to stick to peaceful methods?"

She sinks down onto the grey sofa, right next to the cat who meows in outrage – but then starts purring when Zoe sinks her fingers into his fur. She stares ahead for a while, then says:

"I can't help it. When I was little, my mother and I had to flee to a women's shelter. My father was a real bastard. We kept moving from place to place, and always, always, we were afraid of him. Every time the doorbell or the phone rang, she thought it was him. At the last court hearing, it was about custody, he broke her nose."

"Oh fuck."

"See, nobody believed her how dangerous he was. And he didn't care about the trial or the consequences. He just wanted to show her: no matter what she did, no matter how far she fled or which authorities she involved, she could never be safe from him. So right after the trial, he went over to her and, without saying a word, punched her in the face. After that, everyone knew she was right, but the experience was too much for her. She never really recovered. She died of a stroke two years ago."

"Zoe, I'm so sorry!"

"Now you understand why I can't even think about using violence, right? Violence is always destructive. It ruins everything. Nothing has ever been made better by violence. I can understand that the others think differently, but I just don't want to be part of it, you see?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good. Then we don't have to talk about it anymore. I'm part of the movement. If we are calling ourselves Parts Per Million now, fine. I realize we have to use many different strategies to achieve our goal. But everyone chooses their own path."

"Thank you for telling me. Now I can understand you better."

"It was important to me. The thing is, I want you to write about me, too. There are a few ideas I've got... They're too raw for now, but when they are more developed, I'd be happy if you could listen to me."

"Of course!"

"Good." She gets up, much to the cat's chagrin. "See you," she says and leaves the apartment.

"Smudge!" At the sound of his nickname, the young man looks up from his laptop.

"Someone give me a pen and some paper!"