



Rothilda von Rotortod: OVERTURNED

II. The landing pillars *Ten years later*

Chapter 3: Michael

Mist magic

The fog robes hung in the bare bones of the oaks as if they were interwoven with them. It was as if their gnarled skeleton was fanned by the breath of an invisible sorceress, who revived them and at the same time transformed them into other, unknown forms of life. Weightlessly the dark arms meandered through the billowing nothingness. A motionless silence prevailed, only broken now and then by the dance of a leaf as it embarked on its final journey.

Maggie took a deep breath. She was pleased with the fog that had risen in the morning. Of course, as she knew very well, this pointed to a sunny, bright day. But at least for this morning walk through the forest, she found refuge in the cave of mist. For a few hours she could imagine that everything was back to the way it used to be: that behind the scrawny leaf dress of the trees there was no blinking and flashing like at a highway construction site; that the broad path

she walked on had not been cut to transport the giant steel towers and wings of wind turbines through the forest; that the hill at the end of the path had not been pierced by wind turbines, but still allowed the free flight of the view over the waves of the hills.

She had always liked the fog: this pausing of life, through which things withdrew into themselves and thus became recognisable in their essence. The only problem was that the beauty of nature was now only visible through the filter of a fog fantasy. The cotton candy dreams of a winter morning, the ghostly whirring of a hot summer day, the miracle of a spring awakening, when life suddenly sprouted out of the winter hollow – all this was overshadowed by the enormous reinforced concrete bars, for which "magic" meant nothing more than the conversion of moving air into industrially usable energy.

A glance at Champy, her four-legged companion, tore her from her thoughts. "What's wrong, puppy?" she murmured.

After Champy had been frolicking around her the whole time, he was suddenly frozen in the position of attention: ears erect, right front paw raised and slightly bent, nose in the wind. Something seemed to worry him. Had he discovered a deer? Or a hunter lurking in the undergrowth for prey?

Maggie stopped and looked around. But she couldn't see anything unusual. There was nothing but a puddle-soaked trail lost in the fog. She listened intently into the silence. All she could hear, however, was the whisper of the drops of mist on the leaves. But that could also be pure imagination, the brain's attempt to break the sepulchral silence with invented sensory impressions.

Or did she miss something? She listened again more closely ... And indeed, now she could hear it. A sound that reminded her distantly of the tawny owl's plaintive singing, this drawn-out "Uuuh", followed by a few shorter, dark trembling sounds. But didn't the owls rather let their lamentations resound at night and in the twilight?

Maggie stroked Champy's head. "Don't be afraid, my little one! I'm right here with you."

Champy looked at his mistress in astonishment, as if to say: "The only question is who is protecting whom here!" Nevertheless, he freed himself from his attention position and began to stroll along the path as before.

An invisible threat

Maggie yawned. If she hadn't promised Michael to bring him a few sandwiches, she would certainly have stayed in bed a bit longer after her half-awake night. After the nightmare and the failed attempt to distract herself while watching

TV, she had only fallen into a restless half-sleep. Shortly afterwards the alarm clock had rung.

She still thought it was a crazy idea of Michael to pitch his tent under the wind turbines. But that's how he had always been: stubborn and headstrong. Once he had set his mind to something, he could hardly be dissuaded. And so it had been this time, too.

Maggie could still remember the beginning of this insane venture. It had been at a meeting of her anti-wind-power group, which met regularly in the village pub. They had just started exchanging the latest news when Michael rushed to her table.

"Now I know where my constant headaches come from," he had shouted into the discussion, quite out of breath.

Maggie still remembered the questioning looks of the others – their amazement that was not due to the content of Michael's words, but to his unusual appearance. For as a retired accountant, Michael was anxious to keep up appearances at any time. His hair was always neatly parted, although the thinned-out strands of hair on his head thus reminded of a half-empty filing cabinet. And in conversations, he usually stood back, spoke out only when he was given the floor and prepared his formulations well before arguing. So they all had to look twice to recognise "their" Michael in the excited little man with the tousled quiff.

Since everyone just looked at him in astonishment instead of reacting to his remark, Michael finally declared emphatically: "From the wind turbines! It's the wind turbines that cause my headaches!"

"And for that you're cackling like a flustered chicken?" Monica asked him, as sarky as ever. "These things give me a headache too. After all, each of us is tormented by them." Her big earrings tinkled as she turned away from Michael and reached for her wine spritzer.

But there was nothing to stop Michael that evening. "No, you got me wrong," he insisted. "I'm not talking about our worries and the trouble we're having with the windmills. What I mean is their direct, immediate effect on us." Michael conspiratorially lowered his voice: "Infrasound is the problem – sound waves that are below our threshold of perception, but that make us sick in the long run."

Monica sighed: "Not exactly brand new information, I'd say. It's been known for years. Although ..."

"That's right," Michael cut off her word, "the knowledge itself is not new. But now there are research results that clearly prove the harmful effects of infrasound on health. And here we are not just talking about a simple headache. Infrasound can throw the heart out of rhythm, lead to circulatory

disorders, impair concentration ... In short, wind turbines pose a massive threat to our health."

At this point Mirko joined the discussion. "But this applies equally to street noise and ocean waves, which also emit subsonic noise." Mirko was a physics teacher, his word had weight.

But Michael was not to be deterred. "Maybe so," he admitted, "but wind turbines are everywhere – and more are being built every day! Infrasound is therefore a creeping threat that is increasingly penetrating our everyday lives. It is omnipresent, but at the same time invisible like the radiation from nuclear power stations. And in this case as well, the harmful effects on health have been denied for years – until they could no longer be ignored! If we draw more attention to these connections, people will certainly listen to us more closely. After all, this is a problem that affects everyone!"

Mirko shook his head. The little ponytail, to which he had tied back his hair, swept across his neck. "I think for now we should concentrate on what can be clearly proven. Tens of thousands of bats that flutter into the trap of wind turbines year after year, red kites that die with broken wings under them, the soil compaction caused by the concrete foundations – all this is obvious to everyone, and it is threatening enough. Therefore, we should put these things in the foreground and not point out to something that can easily put us in the corner of conspiracy theorists".

Michael widened his eyes. "Conspiracy theorist?" Maggie had never seen him so upset. "You want to say I'm a conspiracy theorist? The studies do exist, infrasound is not an invention of mine, and besides ..."

"That's not what I meant!" Mirko interrupted him. "I'm only thinking of what our opponents will do with our arguments. We all know how they love to twist our words around. And if the facts are clear, if I can present photos proving my accusations, I can just take the wind out of their sails a lot easier."

"But that doesn't impress many people at all," Michael replied, becoming somewhat calmer again. "Who cares about dead bats? But when it comes to one's own health, everyone gets interested. Then wind power suddenly loses its clean image. And that's why we have to emphasise the problems of infrasound much more. It is precisely because the danger is not so obvious that it is so threatening. It's like a virus or an invisible cloud of poison that slowly penetrates our bodies and destroys them from within."

A self-experiment

A piercing sound tore Maggie from her memories. It was the same wailing sound as before, only now it was heard much more clearly. Maggie stopped

and listened. No, she said to herself, this is not an owl. It sounds more like ... Yes, exactly: like a sob. Someone nearby seemed to be crying profusely.

In the still very dense fog the sound had something eerie. It almost sounded as if the fog itself had been given a voice; as if the wrinkled oak branches, lost in the void above her, were actually the arms of mourning women deploring a dark fate.

Something wet bumped against Maggie's finger. It was Champy, pressing its snout into her hand.

She bent down to him. "Pretty scary all this, huh?" she asked, stroking the soft head fur.

But Champy turned away from her as soon as he had won the attention of his mistress. Barking loudly, he set up a few steps away from her in front of a broken branch he was about to chase.

"Already persuaded, you rascal," muttered Maggie, bending down after the branch. She stroke out and threw it into the mist gullet, from where Champy soon carried it back to her.

A swelling roar began to fill the air. From the nearby airbase fighter jets had risen to their game of cops and robbers. The rumbling was so loud that it drowned out everything else.

Maggie dived back into her memories. She remembered a day when she and Michael had set off for an anti-wind-power demonstration in the nearby town. In the beginning there was nothing unusual about the day. Of course, they had talked about the planned protest march, especially since initiatives from other parts of the country were also supposed to come. But they had also chatted about everyday things. Michael had told about his cat's whim to carry off his slippers and to defend them hissing when he wanted to take them away from him. And Maggie, as far as she remembered, had raved about the blossom of the magnolia trees, which was always so overwhelming and went by far too fast.

But then, as they were just walking down the pedestrian zone, Michael had suddenly fallen silent. "Do you feel that?" he had asked her with his eyes wide open.

Maggie had looked at him worried: "What? What should I feel?"

"Well – the wind turbines!" Michael had replied. "The infrasound. Can't you feel the waves penetrating your body?"

From that moment on it was obvious to Maggie that when Michael said "infrasound" he in fact meant much more than this. The word had become for him the epitome of everything that the wind turbines did to him. For him, even if he was not aware of it, it referred not only to the actual effects of infrasound, but also to the omnipresence of wind turbines, to the fact that there was

nowhere to escape them: not while travelling, not in the media, not in conversations with friends.

Not only the outside world, but also Michael's inner life was shaped by wind power. His entire feeling and thinking was permeated by it. The permanent dealing with something that was constantly setting new boundaries to his life, without his fight against it bearing fruit, tore him apart inside in exactly the way he claimed about the effects of infrasound.

Thus "infrasound" became more and more a fixed idea for Michael. There was no conversation in which he didn't bring it up at some point. "Have you heard about the new Kazakh experiment on infrasound?" he suddenly asked, for instance. Or: "Did you know that infrasound can make you seasick?"

The other group members mostly just rolled their eyes when Michael broached the subject. "Not again!" they moaned, whispering, but in a way that Michael could hear it.

Once more Maggie picked up the spit-slimed branch, which Champy, wagging his tail, had placed in front of her feet. While she swung out for another long throw with the mega stick, she thought back to how Michael had announced his crazy resolve.

She still remembered the triumphant smile that outshone his whole face as he confronted the others with his decision. "Just so you know, I will put my body at the disposal of science," he had suggested, enjoying the astonished looks of his companions.

"What does that mean?" Mirko had asked him mockingly. "Do you want to make yourself available as an object of study for budding doctors? Shall your organs be preserved in spirit to let future generations know of your sweet tooth?"

The small nod to his chocolate passion was intentionally ignored by Michael. "No, wrong guess," he countered. "'Experimental material' is perhaps the most accurate term." He savored once more the incomprehension of the others, then he specified: "I had a complete check-up yesterday by my family doctor, in preparation for my project. Because from tomorrow on, I will live under the wind turbines on that hill for six months."

He pointed out of the window to the hill where the rotor blades of the wind turbines were sparkling in the sun. "In autumn," he continued, "I will have myself examined once more in detail. Then we will see what effects the infrasound has on the human body."

The others still looked at him in astonishment. Monica was the first to catch herself again. "But that doesn't mean anything in fact," she said. "Even if after half a year you are found to have health problems, this doesn't necessarily mean that it's due to the infrasound. The health damage can also be caused simply by the fact that the situation is psychologically stressful for you, that you

are constantly thinking about the damage you could suffer from the windmills, that life under wind turbines just isn't pleasant at all ..."

Mirko also tried to dissuade Michael from his decision. "Besides, it doesn't prove anything when an individual suffers harm from a life under wind turbines," he argued. "For that you would have to assemble a much larger group of test subjects. In addition, it is quite unrealistic to live so close to wind turbines. And above all, the main problem is that you can also suffer damage if you live further away from them. At least you'd need a control group that ..."

"Goodness me, how subtle you are!" Michael complained. Now the smile had disappeared from his face. "What I am planning is not a scientific experiment. I am only interested in using my own body to confirm results from animal experiments. This is supposed to be a wake-up call, something to shake people up! And maybe it's also a way to finally get more attention in the media."

All attempts to talk Michael out of his plan failed. The objection that the media would hardly be interested in an old man camping under a wind turbine simply bounced off him. The very next morning he pitched his tent under the wind turbines, determined to stay there until next autumn.

Wailing sounds

Maggie sighed. Had they unintentionally encouraged Michael in his plan by their appeasing reactions when he talked about infrasound? After all, he was not wrong in what he said. Only the way he said it, his fixation on this one aspect, the exaggerated presentation of the problem as an invisible threat, like a stealth attack on Earth by aliens – all this had just met with rejection from the others.

Nevertheless, after Michael's radical step, they were all plagued by a guilty conscience. Secretly, everyone blamed themselves for the fact that their fellow campaigner now spent his days in a tent under one of the wind turbines they all hated so much. That is why they had also agreed to support Michael in his action – as skeptical as they saw it. They visited him at his new "home" in turn, bringing him food and other daily necessities. After all, Michael had sworn not to move from his place for the next six months. At least, Maggie thought relieved, the six months were almost over.

The path, which had risen slightly the whole time, now ended in a bend. After that followed a last, short ascent, which led directly to the top of the hill.

The roar of the fighter jets above her head had ebbed in the meantime. Maggie could now clearly hear the pounding of the wind turbines, their relentless splitting of the air. The stomping noise was interspersed with the strange wailing sounds, which now could definitely be identified as sobbing.

Maggie paused briefly and listened. There was no doubt: The sobbing came from very close up, from the top of the hill, exactly from the place where Michael had set up camp. But that voice ... That wasn't Michael's voice ... It sounded more like a female voice, a voice that somehow sounded familiar to her ... But in the crying the voice melted away, it was hard to recognise a certain person behind it.

Deeply concerned, Maggie accelerated her pace. Champy had also returned to his attention position. As his mistress walked on, he did not leave her side.

Just before she reached the hill, Maggie recognised a dainty figure near Michael's tent. At first she couldn't make out exactly who it was – only that it couldn't be Michael was immediately clear to her. The person there was much too delicate for that.

A few more steps, then she could distinguish the sunflowers on the red jacket of the person – sunflowers like on the jacket of ... Monica! Yes, this had to be Monica! But what was she doing here? And why was she crying?

"Monica!" she shouted when she arrived within earshot of her friend "For God's sake – what's wrong?"

Even before Monica could answer her, she saw for herself what had happened. Or rather, more exactly: from her friend's sobbing and the image that was presented to her eyes, a sense of the terrible thing that must have happened was formed.

"He's dead, Maggie", mumbled Monica in a soundless voice. "Dead ..."

Everything in Maggie shied away from believing the unbelievable. "But this can't be ... I was just with him yesterday. How can he ... from one day to the other ..."

She herself noticed that she only made nonsensical, incoherent sentences. So she fell silent and took the crying Monica in her arms, while tears welled up in her eyes as well.

At first glance, she might not have recognised that Michael was no longer alive. Of course she had noticed immediately that despite the fog he was not in his tent but a few meters away. His posture, however, did not suggest a sudden heartbeat, an ambushlike encounter with death. He looked more like someone who had fallen asleep again after a heavy nightmare. His face was half turned away from Maggie. Only the lower part was clearly visible to her. His head had sunk to one side and his tongue was hanging halfway out of his mouth.

Maggie closed her eyes for a moment. If Monica hadn't gone on a surprise visit to Michael – so it shot through her mind – she herself would have been the one to find him. She closed her arms even tighter around Monica. To be at the mercy of such a situation all alone was certainly even harder to bear.

"This is all our fault," whispered Monica, after she had gradually calmed down a bit, caressed by Maggie. "If only we had listened to him! If only we had taken

his warnings about the infrasound seriously! Our ignorance must have almost driven him into this suicidal adventure!"

She sobbed again. Maggie stroked her head, comforting her. For a while nothing was heard but the hectic pulsation of the rotors. Then Maggie objected: "You know that's not quite true, don't you? This whole project was all Michael's idea. We even tried to stop him with combined forces! And at the time being we don't know what he died of yet."

Monica looked at her from tear-stained eyes. "Of course we know," she insisted. "It's the infrasound that killed him. Whether it was the fear of infrasound or the infrasound itself – what difference does it make now?"

She took her smartphone out of her pocket, stroked the display a few times, then held it out to Maggie. "Look," she said, "that's what reality looks like."

Maggie reached for the smartphone and shielded it with her hand against the diffuse fog light. What she saw was a Facebook post from Monica: a photo of the dead Michael in front of the wind turbines, framed by the words: "Infrasound kills! R.I.P. Michael!"

"I think we owe it to him", Monica explained when Maggie looked at her in surprise. "So his death has at least some meaning – even if he has failed in his struggle in life."

Impious

Maggie didn't say anything. She didn't want to hurt Monica, she didn't want to argue with her. Not now, not here, in this situation. It would have seemed impious to her. But she found it just as impious to use Michael's dead body as an object of propaganda. Would that really have been what he wanted? And couldn't such a tastelessness even cause harm to their fight – especially if it turned out that the infrasound had nothing to do with Michael's death?

Champy poked her from the side. At first he had attentively caught the scent of death, then he had joined in the whimpering of his mistress and the unknown woman. "Don't worry," Maggie reassured him by patting his head, "everything's all right."

Of course she knew that nothing was "all right". What momentum would result from Monica's unfortunate Facebook posting? How should they continue now? Was Michael's death not a turning point through which everything would change? And how were they to explain to Michael's children what had happened?

The sound of an approaching car put an end to her considerations. In her desperation Monica had called an ambulance. It had been a last attempt to brace herself against the finality of death. On the other hand, however, the

death had to be officially recorded, the cause of death had to be clarified, a death certificate had to be issued, and the dead body had to be properly removed. The bureaucracy demanded its rights even in such a situation.

Two paramedics got out of the ambulance, followed by an emergency doctor. All three of them were still relatively young, in their mid-thirties at the most, and one of them perhaps only in his mid-twenties, Maggie estimated. The emergency doctor and the younger paramedic had a distinctly ascetic stature, the older of the two paramedics seemed rather beefy.

"Is this the heart attack?" asked the emergency doctor, pointing at the dead Michael.

Monica nodded.

"And you called the ambulance, I suppose?" he added as he walked past Monica and Maggie towards the victim.

"Yes," Monica confirmed, "I was just unsure, and so I thought it would be better ..."

"No doubt: exitus", the emergency doctor diagnosed without paying attention to Monica's words. "There's nothing we can do. This one checked out at least six hours ago."

He turned to Monica. "So you think it was a heart attack, colleague?" he asked mockingly.

"Well, I just thought ... because he ... he died so suddenly," Monica replied unsettled. "Besides, he had been camping under the wind turbines for almost half a year. And as the infrasound damages the heart ..."

"Well, in this case our country will soon be extinct," joked the brawny of the two paramedics.

"Should I prepare the death certificate?" asked the other paramedic.

"No need to rush," the doctor decided. "I think we'd better have an autopsy on the body. You never know."

"Come on, let's have a smoke", the bullied man, addressing his colleague, suggested. "I'm still shaken from the ride over the mogul slope."

They lit a cigarette and puffed silently. In weightless processions the columns of smoke wound their way towards the wind turbines, behind which the sun slowly broke through the fog. Shimmering, the light fell down on the flic-flac of the rotor blades, which split it into a rain of lightning and threw it to the ground as splinters of sparks.