

Sample translation from

# *Tell*

by

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## CHAPTER 1

‘Man is nothing more than a grasshopper.’

## HEDWIG

A bear is sitting right there in the meadow. It has long since spotted me, and may have been there for some time already, watching calmly as I emptied the bedpan out next to the hut. It lifts its nose and sniffs the air. I stand there, motionless, as the ground frost creeps beneath my clothes.

The valley is silent. Even the babbling brook is muted; perhaps a layer of ice has formed on the water overnight. The bear scratches itself behind the ear. It doesn't actually look dangerous, and yet the fear, like the cold, is in my limbs. I simply stand there.

Now it looks over at the barn, sniffs again, and seems to smell something interesting. *The chickens, the cows!*, I think suddenly, then notice Wilhelm leaning against the barn wall, perfectly still. He has aimed his crossbow at the bear.

I want to cry *No!*, through fear the bear could attack us if Wilhelm doesn't fatally wound it. After all, you can't bring down an animal like that with a single bolt. Perhaps the bear isn't a bear at all, but a bewitched human being. Like in the fairy tales. But we could use the meat and the fur. And we'd be sure to get an entire sack of flour at the market for its paws. So I don't say a word.

All of a sudden, the door beside me flies open. My mother comes storming out in her nightgown and marches bravely towards the bear. The fearless Aloisa – who won't tolerate, under any circumstances, being called Grandmother – is still in her. She's holding a cooking pot in each hand, and bangs them together so forcefully that even I jump. At the same time, she utters barking cries.

“Hep, hep, hep!”

It works. The bear jumps up in shock and runs away. At that moment, Wilhelm pulls the trigger, and my heart skips a beat. The crossbow twangs, but the bolt is just a swift shadow, too swift for my eyes. Either it has sailed soundlessly into the thick fur, or missed the animal entirely. Never mind. The bear makes a run for it, dashes across the meadow, splashes through the stream and disappears into the forest. From then on, all that can be heard is the crack of branches. The tips of the small pines sway to and fro, then everything falls silent.

I stare mesmerised at the edge of the forest and listen. My heart races. Mother is still holding the pans up in the air, as though waiting to confront the bear again. Wilhelm is trembling, throws us an angry stare, but doesn't say a word. He turns and disappears inside the barn. Mother shakes her head.

“He’s gone mad,” she grumbles.

From the barn, we hear him yell:

“Walter, come here!”

## WALTER

Amongst the tall pines of Gatterwald, I run out of breath. I hate this steep slope. It's not my legs, they would carry me even up Mount Engelberg. It's the panting. Every breath I take hurts my chest, seals my throat shut. Father walks even more swiftly than before, and doesn't notice my panting. He pushes through the forest, clambers along the rock face, jumps from stone to stone, hurries with long strides across the meadow, where he sullenly shoos away the goats. Then he comes to an abrupt halt once more, looks around, listens, holds his breath. And continues on.

We lost the bear's trail in Stäfeli, and could actually have turned back then. Or does Father know where the bear fled to? Does he know how a bear thinks? I stumble behind him, wheezing, looking down at the ground, step by step by step.

We give the Gossalp hut a wide berth, but Tobler still notices us. He steps out of the hut, braces his hands on his sides and gives us a sharp stare. Granny Marie says that Tobler has good eyes. That he can count his animals from the hut. So why don't we ask him whether he's seen the bear?

But Father is staring obstinately ahead, paying no attention to either Tobler or my wheezing. Granny Marie says humans have no business being up among the rocks. A place where no weeds grow bears the devil's footprint, she says.

Once I grow up, I'll stay down in the valley. Forever.

## TOBLER

That troublemaker. He's tearing across my pastures yet again. Tell will send my goats crazy yet. Uphill, that's where he's headed, always uphill, like a glowing spark above the fire. And he knows full well that I spotted him ages ago. But do you think he'd turn in my direction? Acknowledge my tiny existence? Forget it. To that bullhead, no one exists besides him. He didn't even thank me when I dug him out of the snow behind the dunghill and brought him back to life by the fire. Not a word. Not to this day. As though it were nothing. There he lay in the snow, so peaceful, as though he were just having a snooze. Waking him up was goddamn hard, he was almost a goner. Afterwards, he sat hunched and weak by my fire, and re-joined the world of the living only reluctantly. Perhaps when a person is that close to death, they don't even want to come back. Then he simply took off, without so much as a backward glance, even though his hands were so stiff from the cold that he couldn't manage the door. I had to help him! And then I watched him go, silent as a carved peg.

That was eleven years ago now, almost to the day. A terrible autumn. His brother wasn't the only one to be summoned by the Lord back then. The Isenthal river washed the whole of the Eyrihof

farm into Lake Uri, chapel included. It could still be seen drifting on the lake for a while afterwards. The Saint Lazarus monastery stood in a huge, knee-deep puddle. All the praying was futile. Something unchristian must have occurred up there among the rocks. Perhaps the ice witch is to blame, or even Tell himself.

At least he doesn't have his axe with him today. If that troll lays his hands on my forest one more time, then... Oh, what's the use? Tell listens to nothing and nobody, least of all me. But why all the haste? I couldn't help but wonder. Is he on the run? Does he think the first winter storm is lurking beyond the rocks, ready to sweep across the valley? Like eleven years ago.

He's carrying his crossbow on his back; I can see it clearly. Oh, Tell isn't on the run. He's on the hunt, nothing more. Perhaps a pack of wolves is up there waiting for him, or a bear. He'll meet his end there, like his brother did back then. If only his son weren't with him. You can't find fault with Walter, he's a good lad. Honest, though a bit serious. He's got what it takes to run the Tell farm one day. But if you want a friendly smile, you'll be waiting in vain with him too. His father, that blockhead, probably beat all of the joy out of him and replaced it with worry. The stubborn fool! Christ Almighty!

## WALTER

At the Bösenboden slopes, our progress becomes slow-going. If the bear were up here, we'd have spotted him long ago. I slip on a moss-covered rock and cut my shin, fall back silently onto my behind and bite my teeth together. Blood gushes out of the wound and trickles down onto my foot. Father pauses and glances at me.

“You oaf” he grumbles, and walks on.

My vision blurs. I struggle to my feet and limp along behind my father. These stupid tears. In the autumn sun, the blood quickly turns thick and black. The pain subsides, and I soon catch up with Father again.

He turns and gazes over my head down the valley basin, squinting, breathing calmly, as though he hasn't just climbed up half a mountain. I sink down onto the rocks in exhaustion. My hands are trembling, my lips dry. The wound on my shin throbs, but doesn't hurt. I know why Father has stopped. Once we take another few steps forwards, we'll no longer be able to see our farm. But for now it's still visible, albeit just a brown speck at the foot of the valley, right where my great-great-grandfather cut a clearing in the forest a hundred or a thousand years ago. That's how Granny Marie tells it,

in any case. I follow the stream's uphill course with my gaze, trying to decipher exactly where our stream begins, but it's impossible to make out. There must be countless little rivulets that originate from the firs. My brother is sure to be down in the barn, burrowing into the hay until his brown thatch of hair is no longer visible. And yet Father told him to muck out the cows. Only my brother can get away with disobeying him. And he's never been beaten for it yet.

Aloisa must be resting after all the excitement, and Granny Marie might be with the chickens or sitting on the bench in front of the house, sunning herself in autumn's last rays. Perhaps she'll take off her headscarf and stroke a stiff hand across her hair. You can probably count the ones she has left.

My little sister Lotta will be in her crib, sleeping or being nursed by my mother. How I long to be with her. There's nothing more entertaining than when my little sister sucks my finger and makes smacking sounds, then starts to kick her feet and angrily push my hand away because she can't get a single drop of milk out of my finger. Sometimes I put my lips against her tiny neck and blow loudly, making her shriek and thrash about. Nothing in this world is softer than –

“Onwards,” says Father, turning around and heading up the mountainside.

“The bear isn’t up here!” I blurt out, but Father acts as though he hasn’t heard me.

We finally reach the Breitplanggen cliffs. The path leads steeply into the rockface, the steps are only a foot’s width. Who hewed them? My great-great-grandfather, perhaps? The edge of the forest is now far below us. We can see the pine trees from above, as though we’re sailing along the rock face like eagles. I wish I were an eagle. Father walks more slowly now, and at times even comes to a halt, putting his hand against the rock, searching for hold before taking the next step. I do as he does, step by step by step, copying every one of his handholds and every footstep on the mountain ledges.

The mountain is astonishingly warm. Up here, the autumn sun is powerful. Down in the valley it’s colder, shadier. Suddenly Father is as still as a stone, staring in front of him, and then he stamps his foot on the ground, just once, and now I too spot the coiled-up creature lying on a nearby ledge. It swiftly winds its way up the rock to a crack a finger’s breadth, and disappears so suddenly that I’m no longer sure I’ve really just seen a viper. They’re poisonous. It’s a shame the snake didn’t bite him. Because then we would have turned back. But even animals avoid my father, giving him a wide berth, as though they’re afraid of him.

He doesn't say a word, doesn't even look around at me, continuing on as though nothing has happened. As I pass by the crack into which the viper disappeared, my heart races and my palms moisten, and yet I can't avert my gaze. Even though I'm afraid the snake will suddenly flash out into my face, I come to a halt and stare into the darkness. But inside the crevice there's nothing but the blackness of the mountain's insides.

## GESSLER

Home, unfamiliar home. This reddish-shimmering mountain reminds me of the Hochkönig, in whose foothills I spent so many summers as a boy. If only I had known they would be the best summers of my life... Now all I have left is this red crag – it's no Hochkönig, but a crag nonetheless. After all, the firs, their white horns, and the glaciers of this mountain giant are the same. At night they rumble from deep inside, and from time to time they send shock avalanches down into the valleys. These are the naked elements, water and rock, created by God the Almighty. Man is nothing more than a grasshopper. And yet I feel strangely secure, as though I belong here, even though the air is different, harder, more cutting. At these heights, all humans are pared down to their fundamentals. Up here, all of us are just God's children, even kings. Grasshoppers.

The low-lying autumn sun brings tears to my eyes. I hastily wipe them away. Harras doesn't notice; he's not able to. He's a good thirty steps behind me, grumbling, slipping, cursing. He struggles with his weapon, which slaps against his thigh with every step he takes. This sword, which he calls "Thirst" and never takes off, will be of little use to him up here. But to separate Harras from his beloved weapon would be like parting water. In the mountains, a

small knife is enough, to cut open the blisters on one's feet or to whittle a walking stick. Here among the Alpine colossi, a sword is downright ridiculous. Who would draw it against the thundering approach of an avalanche, or hold it protectively over their head before falling rocks? A fool, that's what he is, who deserves to be buried beneath scree and snow mass. God alone makes the rocks rain down, makes snowflakes trickle onto the mountains' peaks until they invade the valleys like the world's largest army. For us grasshoppers, all that remains is God's mercy.

I cross myself.

Is a person closer to God in the mountains?

I'd rather be up here alone, without Harras and his "Thirst", far away from the hostile band of peasants. If looks could kill, theirs would. And yet they're so clumsy in the art of warfare; can't even properly handle a sword; would chop off their own limbs. But no peasants stray up this far. They're afraid of these behemoths, of the mountain giants and ice hexes that lurk among them. The peasants are anxious, distrustful creatures, hiding away among their cows and goats. I have my peace and quiet up here.

In this barren landscape, Harras is the person I'm closest to – yet at the same time my greatest enemy. But I'm only afraid of him down

in the valley; at high altitudes, I'm superior to him. Harras has an almost flat nose and bulging, bulbous ears. He must have got into a lot of fights in his youth. Perhaps he was a prize-fighter; perhaps he was beaten as a boy. I'd rather be without him. I'd rather be back with my wife and child. But now my second winter away from home lies just around the corner. Wasted years.

I have to be on my guard, because the path downward is steep. The descent is always more dangerous than the ascent, I learnt that as a boy, on the flanks of the Hochkönig. The utmost concentration is required now, because one false step could be fatal. I decide that if Harras, behind me, were to fall down the rock face, clattering and yelling, I won't turn around even once.

My right foot slips, I grab onto the rock and look back. Luckily Harras is concentrating on not stumbling over his sword. His bandy legs aren't suited for mountain hikes, but he's a good rider. Our horses await us in St. Jakob. The Most Venerable of Emmen, who considers himself too distinguished for an autumn hike, is tending to them. Although he was born and raised in one of these valleys, he pretends to be aristocratic, he tries to conceal his dialect and talk like I do.

And yet he's still afraid of these mountains, like the native peasants. Superstition clings to his clothes like dirt.

## HARRAS

Blasted climbing! To hell with these confounded hikes! Now it's official: Hermann Gessler is an utter fool; he's not right in the head, not right at all.

Cursed rockface. Don't look down. Pull yourself together. Never again, I say! Never again will I get dragged into this nonsense. From now on he can clamber around up here alone. A bear or a pack of wolves can tear him to shreds for all I care. Oh, how I'd love to hear him scream! Because *that* he would do, scream like a little girl. I'd watch him get torn to shreds, and I'd laugh.

At least you could have some fun with his predecessor. There was always plenty to guzzle, and a glorious amount to screw. Man, how we laughed! Saxer could booze and tell stories like no other. He was a real man, not some lily-livered sissy. Oh how we plundered! The people knew what was what. Just a hint of defiance was enough, a crooked glance from some grubby peasant, and Saxer would swing down off his horse, acting all calm, but with a devilish grin on his ugly mug, and then he'd carry out his "legislative violence", as he put it, his "good Christian duty". It made quite an impression; word got around. And I was his enforcer; loyal,

dependable, his closest confidant and bodyguard; even – I would almost go so far as to say – his friend.

To this day, it still maddens me that I wasn't there when the fool got his head cleaved in two. Perhaps I could have prevented it, overpowered the crazed peasants. Saxer helps himself to this peasant's daughter, the father wrenches himself free, and Friesshardt is daydreaming, too dumb to realize you can't take your eyes off these clannish peasants for a second, even when – or *precisely* when – they're staring silently at the ground. By the time Friesshardt finally gets wise to the danger, the bailiff is lying on top of the girl with his skull beaten in, twitching his last.

Saxer recognised my true potential. I had the makings of a leader, he said, whoreson here nor there. He would see to it that I was taken into the ranks, as soon as we'd subjugated the wild ones. Damn, I would have liked that.

But then the King sends me a little boy like this to replace Saxer. It is and remains a mystery to me how Gessler got this position. Because of his father? I'd like to meet him someday, at least he's the kind of man you can have a conversation with. They say he pulled King Rudolph himself off the battlefield, when he fell from his horse at Dürnkrut and ended up on his back like a beetle, barely

able to move in his heavy armour. It's hard to believe that Hermann Gessler – this coward, pussyfooter and shitter – is the son of a hero! Don't make me laugh! Perhaps his father said: "Come back once you're a man, or don't come back at all!" Ha! I'm sure that's how it was. That's how I want to imagine it! The only annoying thing is, I'm supposed to make sure he survives.

And why? Why should I even care? Why don't I leave him to scramble around the mountains alone? Or should I give him a shove? Over there, up in front, over the cliff edge. Right now, today. Then it would be done. Bailiffs are easy to replace. After all, Gessler is my third already, and my gut tells me he won't be my last. And yet: a fall from the mountain would be too merciful for this sissy. He should see death coming. Preferably in the form of a stinking peasant. This time I want to be there when the bailiff gets his skull cleaved in two.

## GESSLER

There's somebody there. Further down the rock face. Somebody's coming towards us. A monk perhaps, or a travelling performer fleeing the winter. They're probably trying to cross the mountains and head south. Could be a smuggler, or a hunter. He has a bushy, glistening black beard, and isn't wearing a head covering, so it must be a native. He climbs swiftly and nimbly, seeming younger than he looks. The Alpine residents are hard to judge when it comes to age. Even the children look like little adults. He must have spotted me, too, because I'm making no effort to conceal myself, but he climbs on undaunted. Behind him is a boy, light-footed and just as nimble. *His* boy, you can tell. The man is carrying a crossbow on his back. A hunter. I turn around to Harras. He's gripping onto the rock face with both hands, and hasn't yet noticed we have company. A steep drop lies alongside us. The path is hewn crudely into the rock, with barely enough space for two people to pass. I look round for a spot that might allow us to cross paths, and then, all of a sudden, the bearded man is in front of me, close enough to touch, and gazing at my chest. He doesn't say a word, he just stares.

"Watch out, sir!" calls Harras.

He's finally seen the man. His call is intended as a warning, yet only insults me. Harras, that blabbermouth, is waiting for me to show weakness so that he can bandy it about. Like recently, when I was suffering from digestive complaints and suddenly everyone was grinning at me.

"Make room, peasant!" orders Harras, but the peasant pays no attention, he just stares through me as though deep in thought, as though he's waiting for me to evaporate into thin air. Or is he admiring the embroidery on my clothes?

"Where are you headed?" I ask.

The peasant raises his arm and points his finger past my head, coming unpleasantly close to my face. I flinch and feel irritated by my jumpiness. Harras wouldn't even bat an eyelash in my place. The peasant's hand is sinewy, tanned, work-worn. I can almost smell the labour. His eyes are practically drowning in their deep sockets. Perhaps that's why they exude a strange glimmer.

"Up yonder," he answers.

"Wild-hunting is forbidden to the inhabitants of Uri," I say, matter-of-factly.

"Hmm," mumbles the farmer.

“Make room, you fool!” thunders Harras. He tries to catch up as quickly as he can. “Don’t you know who that is standing opposite you?”

I raise my hand in a conciliatory gesture. The man turns to his son.

“Let the gentlemen pass, Walter,” he mumbles.

His son shrinks back, almost clinging to the rock face, staring nervously at the cracks in the rock. His father does the same. Between his feet, there is space for mine.

“The Lord thank you,” I say, stepping cautiously on the vacant spot and gripping the peasant’s shoulder. His clothes feel oily and stink of cow dung. I hold my breath and worry about my clothing. I hate the stink, let go of his shoulder and gulp in air, nodding at his son, who is staring at me as though he’s seen a ghost. The manoeuvre is successful. But my hands now smell of cow. I’ll have to live with it until we reach the next stream. The two natives, father and son, are now standing between Harras and me. He is furious, throwing his hands up in the air; as best he can in this situation.

“You two shouldn’t be up here! Turn back!” he orders. He’s about to completely lose his composure. I feel superior.

“Up here, God decides who’s allowed on the path and who isn’t!” I retort.

“The King would throw you in the tower at Spielberg for such talk!” fumes Harras. He has reached the hunter now. “And you too!”

The hunter glances at him briefly; angry, hard, but concerned and confused too. It’s this hardness, the peasants’ piercing eyes, that makes your blood freeze in your veins.

“Direct your gaze at the floor when faced with a royal representative!” Harras roars at the top of his lungs. The hunter doesn’t make the slightest movement, but he does look away. The boy, on the other hand, begins to tremble all over his body.

“Harras! Concentrate! It’s easier to stamp your feet on level ground!”

Harras falls silent and climbs carefully past the hunter, holding onto him with both hands; if he were to lose his balance, he would pull him down to his death. He even grabs the whimpering boy by the hair, only letting go once he’s squeezed his way past.

“There’ll be consequences, Gessler!” Harras threatens, beside himself with anger.

My henchman is plagued by a fear of heights, and totally overwhelmed. I want to forgive him. But I wish he hadn't mentioned my name.

## WALTER

These clothes! What colours are those? Not blue, not green, but how the lake sometimes is. Not red, not yellow, but how the evening sky sometimes glows. Habsburgs. Aristocrats! The one at the front has long, blonde hair. It really glistens. If you were to touch hair like that, would you even feel it? The one behind him scares me. He carries a sword which hangs heavily by his side. When it bangs against the rocks, it sounds like the jingle of a goat bell. If it were to swing between his legs, he would stumble, and that would be the end of him.

The blonde climbs deftly and carefully past Father, gives me a friendly nod, yet hardly looks at me. I stare at him, even though that's surely forbidden. But I can't help it. His hands and his body are so delicate, as though he were a young woman. Then he climbs past, barely touching me, his hair brushing against me fleetingly. It smells like frankincense. And then it's gone.

But now the henchman behind him curses and loses his temper. He stinks of sweat and wine. Once he's standing before me, he grabs my hair, almost making me lose my foothold, then he lets go and

hurries after his master. He calls him “Gessler” – I’ve heard this name before! He’s the bailiff!

Father doesn’t seem to care. He stares into the mountains and says “Onwards!” I think that’s the only word he knows.