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**I LOVE JUDO,
I LOVE SANDRA**

English translation

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To my family,

to Barbara who was the first to read the book and gave me the
thumbs up,

to Nina who refused to read it before I published the book,
to Vito who donated his judo memories and kept nitpicking about
my descriptions,

to (my dog) Miki, the only being that let me write until he had to
take a leak

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CHAPTER ONE

THE KOMBOL GANG

This story happened when Bundek was still a neglected, wild outlying wood. Children had better avoid wandering there, especially in the evening, because all kinds of bad things used to happen there. Papers reported on the terrible night murders at Bundek.

At dusk, on the road to Zaprude, Antonio saw a street sign with BUNDEK on it. The boy struggled through the crackling, rustling, thick and tall brushwood out of pure boredom. When he passed the first circle of prickly branches, he stared in amazement at a murky little lake. The sign on a crumbling wooden board by the dirty water warned: *No swimming*.

“Who would ever think of swimming in this mud-pit?”, thought Antonio. Standing on the gravel shore he thrust his hands into the pockets of his yellow winter jacket. He frowned thinking of his trouble. He had just moved into a new neighbourhood, Utrine, and got enrolled, against his will, in the Utrine Primary School. For all the people in the neighbourhood he was the new kid in Class 5A. They had moved into this, a new part of the city, which was called just like that – New Zagreb. Earlier they lived on Ribnjak Street, a very nice, old neighbourhood in downtown Zagreb. A centuries old park stretches there, surrounded by buildings. He did not like at all the outlying district to which they moved.

With his fair and long hair Antonio caught everybody's eye in the new school. Many fourth and fifth class girls glanced at him in admiration during breaks. His winning light blue eyes stood out on

his delicate oval face. Long wisps of his almost golden hair pushed out from under the blue woollen cap on his forehead and round his neck. He was always well dressed. The tough Utrine boys always liked to give a good whipping just to such smartly dressed good lookers. That is why Antonio liked to wander alone every day.

'What a bore...' thought Antonio, his hands in his pockets. He followed with a listless look a duck which left on the water a wake as if someone was cutting paper with scissors. While he looked at the lake absorbed in thought, Antonio felt an itch in his nose. He moved the nose to the left, then again to the left, but finally he had to take his hand out of the pocket and scratch his nose. It itched terribly: *something will happen*.

"Don't go there alone... Don't go there alone... That's a large wood", kept repeating his mom Mirela. After all, she was afraid of everything: afraid of Antonio getting sunburned, or getting soaked, or catching a cold.

A black bird cawed twice under the downcast grey sky and the sound broke the frightful silence. Another black bird flew over Antonio.

CAW... CAW...

As the last winter afternoon in January drew to a close an icy wind rustled through the remote wood at the outskirts of the city.

The wood and its underbrush by the river Sava were soaked in water. In order to pass through one had to push branches apart like a thick cobweb. Antonio's red leather boots, *Army* brand, were already very muddy. He bent his head in order to avoid the thorny underbrush and then, on the muddy ground, he saw bottles, shards of beer and other bottles, a lot of trash, and felt a terrible stench. He carefully avoided stepping into a pile of still fresh excrement. 'It

seems that this Bundek is just an ordinary outdoor toilet for many', thought Antonio and coughed because of the unbearable foul stench.

"Why are they taking you to New Zagreb?" his best friend Tvrtko Kraljević had wondered before Antonio left. The other Ribnjak boys also wondered.

"Only bullies live across the Sava!" said Kozić. And Sven Koprivica came up with some advice that could bring him back to his old Ribnjak neighborhood.

"You must get into trouble, all the time, pick fights, do badly at school", Sven advised him.

A branch whipped him dangerously close to his eye. It hurt. Antonio jumped out of the underbrush. On an unexpected clearing amid the desolate wilderness stood his great discovery: there was a wooden hut in front of him.

A blow of the wind shook the wood and the ramshackle hut and its door crashed open. Antonio stepped back like a rabbit into the thicket. But only darkness and silence flew out of the hut.

'Who does it belong to?' he wondered, afraid and amazed. He gazed into the dark interior of the hut. It gaped before him, inviting him to enter but he shivered at the very thought of it. 'Who lives here?... A drunk, a tramp?... A murderer?' The lopsided makeshift hut looked like a poor man's shack.

The wind dropped and the wood grew quiet. Antonio blew twice into his hands. The wind had chilled him to the bone. Just as usual he pushed his bangs under his cap because they covered his eyes. He zipped up his bright yellow jacket to his neck. He trod carefully on the crackling twigs, and then plucked up heart and

stepped forward, mercilessly crushing the twigs under his boots. It was all deserted.

"Hallo!" he nevertheless tried to announce his arrival with a low voice at the door of the hut. After the silence which returned his call, he peeked into the hut and got in. It was dark and empty.

In the darkness of the hut he remembered his grandfather who often used to tell him that curiosity killed the cat. 'But who would resist this, grandpa?!' wondered Antonio and entered the hut. His eyes soon got used to the dark. He began to ransack through the discovered things and picked up a torch which suddenly lit up. He squinted because of a sudden light before he turned it away. Under its light he found quite a few other things, a hammer, pincers, a saw... and two crumpled wet blankets. Actually, he had found somebody's base.

'Imagine running into such a base.... I really have a reason to ring up Kraljević', thought Antonio and enthusiasm flushed his cheeks.

He took off his cap to cool his head, hot with excitement, and sat on a rickety bench. There was a large inscription on the wooden wall of the hut, written with red spray. He turned the torch toward it.

THE KOMBOL GANG

BBB Dinamo

'Who are the Kombol gang?' Antonio's flesh crept on his neck. This was the hangout of the vicious *Dinamo* fans, the *bad blue boys*, always spoiling for a fight. He switched off the torch. He felt that he could end up like a cat caught by dogs on their turf.

He shivered with cold in front of the hut. As he pulled on his blue cap in the bracing, pure winter air, he heard clattering coming

from the side, across the hut, from the thick reeds. The clatter was now very near and sounded like pots rattling next to his ear. Something must have been approaching nearer and nearer. Antonio's eyes blinked as he quickly sought a refuge. He began to run, panic-stricken, towards the wood path, but prickly branches hid the path. He could also hear the birds as they shrieked and flew away, he heard the reeds rustling almost next to him, he saw the reeds moving apart, he heard the whooshing sound rushing towards him like a lit fuse.

'They'll catch me!' And then he saw high tangles of impassable bushes and threw himself frantically into the thicket. He found himself in a deep web of merciless thorns.

A boy rushed out of a dry reeds on a bicycle. Because of his mad ride he had to brake hard in the circular clearing in front of the hut. Mud splattered all over the place. All flushed, the boy got off his mountain bike. Hot because of the dash, he took off his woollen Dinamo fan cap. Antonio had a good look at him through the thorny web. The freckled Dinamo fan was his age. His ketchup-red spiky hair stuck out stiffly toward the sky. A real punker. Coming closer, clumsily and imprudently, in order to see him better through the gap in the bushes, Antonio was stabbed by a sharp thorn in his knee and let out a squeak.

The aggressive Dinamo fan frowned. Having heard Antonio's muted squeak, Redhead suspiciously raised his eyebrows. Only the soft rustling of the wind could be heard. Redhead made a beeline for the bushes at a fast pace.

"ALAAARM...!" A male voice from the distance broke the silence.

Fear suddenly knotted Antonio's stomach.

Redhead forgot the bushes as a hooded biker dashed through the rustling reeds in top gear.

"Trouble! Zok's old man is looking for us!" shouted the tall newcomer, braked and jumped off the seat.

Because of the thick bush web before his eyes Antonio had an impression that he was watching them through a nylon stocking.

The newcomer was really tall and judging by his appearance almost a young man. He had a large black hood of a black tracksuit on his head and his face could not be seen.

"ZOK'S OLD MAN HAS RAISED CAIN!" continued loudly the guy with the black hood. "He has been asking questions in the street... I saw him talking to Pezo...", he added. He threw his bike on the muddy ground. Its paint was peeling and it was clearly a piece of junk he couldn't care less about.

"Did Pezo say anything?" asked Redhead worriedly. He was pacing nervously while he listened to the news.

"I haven't heard anything...", replied the tall guy. At a distance his face was still not visible. He threw a heavy black knapsack off his back and started to spit from under the black hood.

"And where are the others??!" asked Black Hood.

The red-haired Dinamo fan was red all over his face because of the biting cold. He first sniffled and then spat with relish into the mud.

"No idea...", he said.

Both heard the approaching crackle.

"There they are!" they shouted in unison.

On the other side of the path, opposite the hut, the reeds again began to shake violently. Hidden in the thorny bushes Antonio tensely and fearfully awaited the arrival of the host. Just in case

Black Hood got hold of a large stick. The reeds spread open and only another biker rushed into the base. The kid, maybe eight years old, braked in his tracks surprised by the slippery mud. He also dug in his feet while braking, but crashed with the front wheel into an old stump, bumped his chest against the steering wheel and, light as a bird, flew over the bike and tumbled on the putrid ground.

The three in the base, along with Antonio in the bushes, still looked at him, confused after such a terrible fall. Redhead spread his arms in amazement, and Black Hood just stood there, as if rooted on the spot, with the stick he had started to swing.

The skinny kid struggled up moaning. His jacket, trousers and face were totally muddy.

"Zok has a bandage on his eye...", he said with a painful broken voice as he approached them limping. He was on the verge of tears because of what had happened.

"Zok's dad is looking for us, and the *police*... Emil heard that they will call the police! Now Emil will also...", said the kid tearfully. His thin voice trembled, and his chin shook with fear.

"Where is Emil now?" shouted Black Hood and angrily threw the stick. The dangerous stick whizzed just an inch from the kid's head.

"Are you nuts!?" cried the Kombol kid. The stick slammed against the trunk of a poplar next to him, and the sound rang in the clearing. It could have killed him. Black Hood didn't care for anybody.

In the thorny bushes, Antonio's hair began to itch under his cap. He was sore all over, mainly because of the thorns. His grazed knee bled through his trousers. In this silly, motionless, bent position he was captured by thorns and stabbed all over.

Nevertheless, at that moment he felt better than the others. THE POLICE WAS NOT AFTER HIM.

The wind blew through the wood like an evil spirit. They were all frozen. Because of the cold Redhead again pulled the *Dinamo* fan cap out of his pocket, put it on and pressed it hard against his ears. It was very cold and the news looked bad. Even the youngest member of the Kombol gang pulled his warm *Dinamo* cap out of his pocket and put it over his ears down to his eyebrows. The icy wind almost blew off Black Hood's cowl.

"Emil says not to come back before he comes for us..." They all jumped up when they heard the muffled mumbling of the newcomer. He had noiselessly crept up. He mumbled because he spoke through the blue *Dinamo* shawl wrapped round half his face and nose.

"What are we going to do?" continued to mumble the boy leaning on his bike. His black eyes gazed around at all of them. Black Hood angrily spat on the ground.

"We'll wait...", said Redhead.

Antonio's throat was so dry and he felt as if someone had spilled his last drink of water in the desert. He realized that he could not leave his hideout so soon.

"Wait for what?" asked the mumbler.

"DO STOP MUMBLING, YOU SILLY IDIOT!" exploded Black Hood. '*Do stop mumbling, you silly idiot...* ', resounded from the wood behind him.

"Really, what are we waiting for?"

Black Hood unexpectedly lost control. He violently swung his fist towards the mumbler whose eyes popped wide open with fear.

"CAW.... CAW..." Crows fluttered above them as if fleeing the fight.

"Hey, stop!" shouted Redhead and fearlessly blocked Black Hood's hand. "Tell me where you hid Zok's bike!" Redhead was the leader. "I am asking you, WHERE'S THE BIKE? Do you really want to bring the police here?" Redhead turned his angry and freckled face towards the dark hole hiding Black Hood's face.

"CAW... CAW...", croaked again the crows fluttering above them.

Black Hood pointed at the bushes behind the hut. The members of the Kombol gang followed him immediately.

Antonio's eyes and mouth opened wide when he saw that they were moving towards him. Black Hood was tearing through the layers of branches, breaking them, pulling out tangled undergrowth. Redhead grasped a long, thick ivy stem with his strong hands and the other boys pulled the stem with all their might until it broke. Antonio stopped breathing. He felt a cold gust. They didn't see him only because it was already dark. However, his bright yellow jacket could be glimpsed through the thinned branches as through a tennis racket. The muddy sole of one of his boots protruded from the bush. His hot and scared breath created a mist coming out of his mouth. If only they looked more closely...

Antonio couldn't be more cold but he nevertheless shivered as if somebody had taken a blanket off him. He was so stiff he couldn't move.

"I knew nobody could find it here...", said Black Hood and violently tore a bike out of the bushes. They pulled out the stolen, shiny, gold varnished bicycle - a *Super 21 Speed*.

"What are we going to do with it?" whined the smallest member of the gang again.

Black Hood filliped him hard on the forehead. The kid shut up and just held his forehead with a smothered snuffle. Antonio opened his eyes wide for the first time and looked straight at them in disbelief. He took a breath just as much as fish would need on dry land. He knew that even if he moved his small finger, the branches would crackle and everybody would hear it.

"Let's go home...", whined the Kombol kid suddenly like a violin. Tears had washed the mud off his face. He looked like a weeping masked soldier.

"What's the matter with you?" yelled Black Hood at him.

The kid kept sniffing. Loud barking suddenly cut his crying short.

"Fang! Fang!" Redhead greeted the dog cheerfully and began to stroke Fang's cold fur with great joy. The weeping kid smiled when he saw the old German shepherd. Even Black Hood gladly tapped the head of the big black dog. They were all surprised and glad. The dog licked their hands warming them with his hot breath.

"Fang! Fang!" The mumbler also called him and caressed the dog's ears. Fang swung his head left and right and made all of them laugh. For a moment the dog stood rooted to the spot and then barked loudly and moved away carefully sniffing through the bushes behind the hut.

Antonio faced the shaggy beast with its wolf-like eyes. The dog looked at him keenly, its hackles raised. Its bared teeth shone white in the dark. Antonio broke into a sweat.

The dog tried hard to get deeper into the bushes. Shrunken with panic Antonio attempted to move away from the bursting animal.

There was no room for escape. Branches crackled under his feet, the thicket broke up as if made of matches, and the toothy muzzle of the dog soon snarled into his face. Antonio barely managed to stifle a cry. His heart thundered in his ears. He heard noise in his ears, noise in his head, noise everywhere, he heard the dog's bark.

"FANG! FANG! FANG!" The red headed leader of the Kombol gang leader called the dog with several penetrating whistles and loud cries. Fang used to behave like that when chasing cats, or *something else*. Suddenly the dog turned and went away. Antonio was sure that he had fainted or died for a second ago.

Luckily, the members of the Kombol gang secluded themselves in the hut with the dog. They could be heard talking indistinctly. Antonio breathed with relief, and only then inhaled deeply as if he had been long under water. He began to pull out carefully from the trap into which he had fallen and stopped every time when the branches crackled more loudly, waiting for the branches to stop moving and get silent.

An unpleasant tingling sensation rushed through his stiff legs like a column of ants. He hardly managed to reach the hut on wooden legs. Waiting for his legs to recover he listened to the gang in the hut and got closer to the wall.

"... you shouldn't have stolen it!!

"Why did you scatter? I sat on the bike and ran away!" One of the members of the Kombol gang banged against the wall of the hut with a foot as if he wanted to get out.

Antonio stood riveted with his back to the hut until the noise inside subsided. The dark wood echoed with the mad thumping of his heart. His breathing was heavy and fast paced. He almost choked as fear gripped his throat. His eyes filled with troubled tears but he

managed to suppress a cough. Whew, that would have given him away! He closed his eyes for a moment to calm down before running away. He brought his breath under control. But not his curiosity as well. With a trembling hand he slowly moved a piece of cardboard covering the tiny window. As he peered from the dark, his pupils widened. He could see them quite well. The members of the Kombol gang squeezed together in a small space. They sat under the light of a torch hung on the wall. Black Hood didn't take off his hood even inside. All the time the sinister guy looked as if he had no face and as if he spoke out of darkness. Antonio heard they called him Snake.

"When they stop looking for us, we'll give them back the bike", suggested Snake.

The smallest, weeping Kombol kid had a funny nickname, Mammoth. The Redhead was Hornet, and the mumblor Eagle. Eagle took off his cap and displayed his bright yellow short hair. Squatting, he spat on the earthen floor of the hut.

"We could do without this...", said yellow-haired Eagle. He had stopped mumbling when he removed the *Dinamo* shawl from his mouth. "Who hit Zok?" he asked them.

"I never aim at the head with the slingshot", said little Mammoth.

When they couldn't solve the riddle, they began to quarrel and noise rushed out of the window.

"Guys, we are all in danger!" shouted the red-haired Hornet and suddenly stood up. He wore shabby jeans and a short orange-black jacket. The quarrel stopped. He stood among them with widespread arms like a cop controlling traffic.

"Do you get it? Zok saw us all quite well before the *wasp* hit his eye!" shouted Hornet, the leader.

Antonio listened very carefully to Hornet's words, stirred and found a better vantage position for his eye at the window.

"He just had to come along as I was taking the rear view mirror off the bike...", remarked Snake.

"You set us up! Why are you stealing parts?" Eagle suddenly jumped up out of his squat.

"Because I fix your bikes, too. And now I needed a rear mirror! OK?" shouted Snake. He looked at Eagle as if he intended to throw him out of the hut. Tension filled the hut. They all knew that Snake was stealing. They knew that he was taking lamps, rear view mirrors, seats, chains, even tires off other people's bicycles. These stolen parts were built into their own bicycles. Fang, until then curled up by the door, suddenly stood up and moved towards Snake. The hood hid Snake's face while he took tins out of the knapsack... Soon Fang began to lick a pastry out of a small tin. Tension eased up a little.

Snake bribed them all and offered cigarettes around. The small hut was soon filled with smoke, and the four boys, not used to smoking, began to cough. The cigarettes obviously choked them.

"Man, what if the cops come?" groaned Hornet because of the acrid smoke in his lungs.

"What if they slap us in the CAN?" Little Mammoth's weak squeaky voice revealed that he was afraid and choking on his cigarette. His long, black brush-like eyelashes fluttered fast when the smoke bit his eyes.

"They will not slap us in the can, stupid!" sneered Snake from under the hood. "Coward!" he shouted at the kid. He angrily flailed

his arms and accidentally burned Eagle's face with the cigarette. Eagle jumped away.

"Slob!" cried Eagle angrily. He rubbed the burned face, but it only hurt more. "SLOB! YOU FLUNKED CLASS TWICE AND YOU MOCK OTHERS!" freaked out Eagle and tore Snake's black hood off his head.

Snake's face appeared, pale and covered with pimples. He blew his top in a second and grasped Eagle's neck with a steely grip. He forcefully bent him towards the earthen floor. Eagle could only see the floor while Snake filliped him hard on his head with the other hand.

"Ouch! Ouch...! Don't beat me...!"

"Stop it!" shouted Hornet. "We wouldn't even hear the police because of you two!"

Hearing Hornet's words Snake and Eagle stopped their dangerous quarrel and cooled down. They all calmed down.

At the same moment Antonio crept in the dark along the wooden wall of the hut. Unfortunately, he tripped over the stolen *Super Speed*, leaning against the hut on the outside. The noise was terrible.

"POLICE!!!" broke out of the hut, a sound of terrible fear accompanied by a crash. Both the Kombol gang and Fang darted out. The boys ran panic-stricken as fast as they could into the dark kicking up a racket. Antonio got up from the muddy ground and also dashed into the night, seeking salvation and a way out of the unknown wood. He didn't know where he was running in pitch darkness and had to slow down, and then suddenly got stuck in deep and impenetrable reeds. He was now scared of the darkness. He

forced his way through the reeds hissing like a steam railroad engine as it slows down.

Hidden and scattered, the Kombol gang listened for a while to the nocturnal screeching of birds of ill omen.

The screeching of crows opened up the dark soul of the wood. Far away in the thicket, the hidden boys called one another with long undulating whistles. And then Fang's barking signalled a sudden change. The dog's loud, continuous bark told the gang that he had caught somebody.

The undulating whistles of the gang resounded again. The gang spirit arose again among the confused boys, and they rushed one after another towards Fang, barking wildly in the base. Then the barking stopped. Fang had captured somebody. The Kombol boys could only see a silhouette in the dark. The reeds were rustling in the darkness.

Mammoth ran up the last with the torch which trembled in his hand and flashed it right into Antonio's eyes.

The ashamed Kombol gang flew into a rage because of the suffered fear.

"WHO IS THIS?!" shouted Hornet panting. "Who are you? *What are you doing here?*" shouted Hornet once again, struck Antonio's chest with his palm and roughly pushed the motionless boy away. The dog barked at him.

"Nothing... Just walking around..." Antonio shielded himself from the light of the torch with his hand. He kept looking at the dog with one eye.

"How long have you been here, *rat?*" spoke Snake like a ghost out of the black hood. "Who sent you here, *rat?*" asked Snake. Resembling a black hooded hole he got into Antonio's face. When

Antonio did not answer, the furious Snake gripped the surprised boy's arm and bent it on his back. "We'll tie you up and make you sleep here, rat!" As he threatened, Snake continued to twist Antonio's right arm.

"Ouch!" Antonio cried painfully and moaned. "Ouch!"

The members of the Kombol gang sneered. Eagle tore the blue ski cap off Antonio's head.

"Sissy!" jeered Eagle. Their voices sounded like the screeching of all the pheasants and crows in the Bundek wood. Antonio's hair provoked loud and ugly laughter.

Rather long golden hair with meticulously cut bangs and neatly cut round his neck framed Antonio's head like a golden helmet. Hornet approached Antonio, still lit by the torch. They watched the female hairdo on the boy with disgust

"Where did you come from?" Hornet gave the boy's helmet-like hairdo a nasty fillip. Snake followed him even more violently. Eagle did the same. The fillips were very painful.

"Aw, let me go!" fumed Antonio. He began to break free but he could only feel Snake's relentless steel grip. He was already half doubled because of the arm bent on his back.

"Let me go!" He shouted tearfully as he struggled. Snake suddenly let his arm go, but then tripped him up. Antonio fell on his bum. He impaled himself on the spikes of the crushed reeds and shuddered because of the severe pain in his buttocks.

"Sic 'em, Fang!"

Nobody could stand up so quickly after such a fall, but Antonio jumped to his feet. The dog barked.

"Sic 'em, Fang!"

The dog barked at Antonio again. The torch light switched to the dog. The darkness of the night absorbed them. The dog growled. Only his canines shone under the light beam.

"Attack, Fang!" cried Snake hoarsely and pointed at Antonio ordering the dog to jump on the boy. "Attack, Fang!"

The bristling shepherd kept barking and moving his head left and right, watching and seeking a side from which to attack the boy who was backing away. In order to defend himself from the dog Antonio held out his wide spread palm and carefully stepped back. Fear spread over his face with every growl.

"Sic 'em! Sic 'em!" Snake incited the dog. Fang jumped on Antonio as quick as a flash.

The light of the torch jumped all over the scramble accompanied by the blood-curling racket of barks and screams. Antonio flailed his arms because the rearing shepherd pressed his shoulders with its strong front paws. Shaking frantically his head and hair Antonio fidgeted shrieking under the dog, heavy as a bear. As the dog continued to jump on Antonio, the wood resounded with the dog's frightful hoarse bark and Antonio's terrified cries. Little Mammoth's heart throbbed with concern.

"Stop, Fang!" Mammoth's impetuosity flattered like a good spirit among the members of the Kombol gang.

"Stop!" Hornet also shouted at the dog and resolutely stepped forward to stop Fang. But the stray dog had already got off Antonio and ran after the fair-haired boy who fled through the reeds. The night swallowed them in front of the eyes of the gang. Mammoth aimed the torchlight into the night: the reeds there stood still as if wondering why they were being illuminated.

Fang stalked Antonio closely through the Bundek trees. The dog was trained not to let strangers leave the base. All the boys in New Zagreb knew that the Kombol gang had a dangerous dog in their base. That's why nobody dared to enter the Bundek wood more deeply. Antonio snuggled behind a trunk and nervously looked around. Because of the dark only the dog's panting could tell him where Fang was. Antonio listened carefully in the silent darkness. All of a sudden the dog's shining eyes appeared before him. Horrified, Antonio let out a frightful scream. Fang recoiled, Antonio stumbled and knocked down the stacked bicycles of the Kombol gang. He jumped to his feet and started to run shouting. The shepherd followed him barking.

But then Antonio picked up the first bicycle he could find in the dark and mounted. Frantically groping for the pedals he was hardly able to get the bike moving. With legs wooden with fear, he rushed through the wood following the wide band of the bicycle light. The dog followed him and barked all the time. Antonio zigzagged through the dark, turned right, turned left and rode on straight ahead. During the rush he had all the time the feeling that the furious shepherd would again jump on his back. A thin branch whizzed across his face, another branch snagged him. One branch after another whipped his face. Nobody could ride as fast as he did. The dog ran after him and barked. But then Fang stopped by the blue street sign with *Bundek* on it, and remained by the lake. Sniffing around the black dog disappeared.

At seven in the evening Antonio dashed out like a comet out of Bundek onto the brightly lit street on the new golden *Super 21 Speed*.

'Tomorrow I'll wake up and sit in the Ribnjak park with Kraljević, and we'll be bored', thought Antonio as he sped on. He already wished he had only dreamed all this. He hurtled along the main street towards the Utrine district.

The members of the Kombol gang were still at Bundek and rushed on their bicycles one after another as they negotiated the uneven path around the small lake in the darkness. Eagle streaked after Snake with his hood off. Stooped, Snake dashed perilously after Hornet. Little Mammoth lagged far behind them; he found it hard to control the steering wheel in the dark. Unlike the others, he did not know how to ride over ditches safely, and he was slowing down and ever faster losing sight of them.

Already during the night ride along the lake Hornet was aware that the stranger with a long fair hair had got away. On the road, as soon as they left the dark Bundek, you could see everything under the street lamps as by day. He was nowhere in sight.

The gang again began to assemble one by one. Eagle braked in his tracks and looked at Hornet in amazement. Bareheaded Snake, still braking on the asphalt, snapped: "Why did you stop, idiot?" and pulled the black hood on his head.

"Let him ride that bike!" laughed Hornet and looked at them meaningfully, puzzling them. "This will really help us. Let the Police get *him*", laughed Hornet as he explained his infernal scheme.

"Very good plan!" mumbled Eagle, his nose muffled again with the *Dinamo* shawl. The shawl hid his grin, but his eyes laughed. Snake also gloated in the shadow of his large hood.

In a good temper the members of the Kombol gang set off for home along the shortcut through the Zapruđe district. They laughed

when they remembered how their Fang had scared the white rat they found in their Bundek base.

"Fang would not have bitten him really, would he?" asked little Mammoth warily.

"I saw you freezing as if Fang was going to eat him up. Fang and I always play that way. He likes being teased. He is an excellent actor!" Snake laughed out loud because for a moment he had fooled them all with Fang.

They passed the main crossroads and then rode on slowly across the lawn to Utrine. An advertisement showing a puppy and a kitten shone on the roof of doctor Pezo's vet clinic. That was the landmark of their neighbourhood. The thousands of windows of New Zagreb shone and beckoned them home. Mammoth was particularly glad to come back to Utrine because the lamp of his bike had given out at Bundek. The kid's blue fan cap had dropped to his eyebrows, and it seemed that only his long and thick eyelashes were holding his cap in place.

"I couldn't see anything!" he said looking at them with his eyes half covered.

"Your lamp conked out when you crashed... we'll fix it", replied cheerfully Snake from under his large black hood. Little Mammoth also sensed the strange mood of his friends.

"The rat must live down by the Sava", said the kid, but he wondered why his buddies were not after the enemy.

"We'll find him, don't worry, the rat will not get away", added Hornet warmed by the *Dinamo* cap.

Little Mammoth still wondered and pulled his cap to the top of his forehead. "Where did he come from?" He asked again, surprised and as if bewitched.

Of course, nobody could answer that. The inroad of the rat into their secret base annoyed them. Such a thing could not pass without revenge.

The same evening Mr. Tonko Malovan was sauntering up and down Mihovil Kombol Street. It had grown dark already at 4 p.m., and after 5 it was rather cold. The temperature dropped to 27 degrees. Because of the cold Malovan became even more furious by 7 o'clock. He twitched his thick black moustache up and down and groused greetings to passers-by. Many people knew Mr. Malovan the butcher. Malovan's famous butcher shop was situated on Barac Square next to the Utrine market.

Malovan was a stocky man with a big head and strong jaws which widened his head. He also had a thick double chin and a short neck, sunk into his strong shoulders. He clasped his big fists behind his back and again started to parade his flabby belly around. He was frozen. And Zok's new bicycle was nowhere in sight. Nowhere!

Blood rushed to his head whenever he remembered how he had driven his son Zoran to hospital at the same time yesterday. A small blue horseshoe made of insulated electrical wire had penetrated deep into the boy's eyelid. The doctor had to give him five stitches. By sheer luck his eye was not injured! Zoran told him that he had been hit by a *wasp*, as he called it. The *wasps* were small horseshoes, actually wire bullets discharged from the slingshot. The Kombol Street gang made them. Whenever he remembered the incident Malovan grew livid. He was so angry that he had turned into a walking wasp nest. He could not believe that a kid could be so crazy to blind his son, almost. And have so much cheek to steal his bicycle on top! The police were still in the dark.

'I will find them myself', fumed Malovan walking up and down the street.

The rest of the Kombol gang assembled on the benches in the dark local park next to Kombol Street. About twenty of them distributed round two demolished wooden benches kicked up a racket. They all wore dark jackets and the same blue woollen *Dinamo* caps. With Emil at their head, they spotted Malovan approaching them through the park. They all knew what had happened to Zok the day before and avoided his furious father.

When Malovan stopped before them, vapour issuing out of his nostrils in the cold night, he looked like a raging bull. The racket stopped. The gang members hung their heads: each stared at his boots, at the bench, at his trousers, at anything below. They look like kittens fearfully huddled in a cardboard box, thought Malovan.

"RETURN THAT BIKE AND I'LL LET YOU GO, BEFORE I GET TOUGH!!" shouted Malovan. He did not tolerate their silence even a second. "What now? Cat eat your tongue, what? No tongue, no bicycle, what? Hey, big boy...?" continued Malovan and pushed Emil who was sitting at the edge of the bench.

"We didn't do it... Look, all our bikes are here... But not your bike...", Emil worked up the nerve to speak up. He was wearing large, black square glasses.

"SO, MY BIKE IS GONE?" replied Malovan and pulled Emil's frozen nose. Emil reached for his nose as if he was afraid that it would fall off.

"Ouch!" wailed Emil. All the gang members sat stiffly around him. They sympathized with Emil as if they felt the same tickling in their noses.

"I'LL GET 'IM! TELL 'IM he will not get away...", kept shouting Malovan as he walked out of the park. And then Malovan suddenly stopped because he saw something in the street.

A bike was approaching on the pavement. In the darkness Malovan wasn't sure whether he had recognized it. He turned his strained eyes into the distance. His frozen face was suddenly hot, and his blood boiled as if he had downed two large brandies.

It was Antonio riding down Kombol Street on the *Super 21 Speed*. The golden bike shone under car headlights.

'What am I going to do with this bike?" thought Antonio fast. 'The cops are also looking for it. Without it I wouldn't have saved myself! I'll leave it in front of the school', flashed upon him as he rode along. He still thought about how he had barely saved his skin by Lake Bundek.

Malovan suddenly turned up under the lamp of the bike. Antonio rang the bell at the last moment, but the big man dug his feet in front of him as if he were stopping a train. The bike stopped with screeching brakes, and Antonio struck the belly of the man with his head and shoulder.

"*Whose bike is this?!*" - Malovan's loud voice was lost in the even louder crash of the bicycle on the pavement. He pulled Antonio off the bicycle as if he were taking him off a horse.

"I borrowed it...", Antonio's tongue froze. A hand struck his cold cheek.

"Don't let me see you round Zoran ever again... Ever! YOU ALMOST KNOCKED OUT HIS EYE!!" Malovan's shouting rang around. While Antonio felt his painful cheek, more and more members of the Kombol gang with blue caps on their heads were running out of the park into the street.

" Don't...! Please! I didn't...! I'm not guilty...!" shouted Antonio struck with fear. The members of the gang giggled.

"Where do you live, you KOMBOL STINKER?!" Malovan' voice rang out as if through a PA system.

"In the new building...", barely managed to utter the terrified Antonio. He was scared of getting slapped again.

"Now we will go there, I want to see your dad who taught you to shoot slingshots and steal...", shouted Malovan again, grabbed Antonio's jacket and suddenly pulled him along. The boys with *Dinamo* fan caps could no longer stop laughing.

"Stop! Neighbour, Mr. Malovan... Hey!... Hey!..." The penetrating voice they all heard belonged to doctor Pezo. The vet ran towards them holding his black hat.

"Come on, Mr. Malovan, come on, neighbour, the bicycle is here now... Come on, let him go. This is kid stuff", said the doctor panting as he tried to calm Malovan.

"Dad, it's not *him!*" called out the wounded Zok who had suddenly appeared in the street. He had a large white bandage over his eye. There was a hush. The boys with blue *Dinamo* cap on their heads stepped back a step or two. Laughter disappeared from their lips. They waited warily.

Malovan looked confused when he unexpectedly saw his son. "What do you mean?" he asked. His thick moustache drooped as if it was about to fall off his face. The cold night suddenly cooled down Malovan. A small group of older curious passers-by hummed behind the butcher.

Antonio could no longer withhold two heavy hot tears and they treacherously ran down his cheeks.

"There, you see... it's not *him*", interfered the doctor, and hugged Antonio's shoulders protectively. Pezo's kind gaze through his round red glasses calmed everybody in the street as he gently told them to break up.

"Come on, it's OK...", said Pezo calmly and tapped sniffing Antonio on the shoulder. The Malovans, father and son, were already getting away with the golden-yellow bicycle followed by the curious looks of the crowd.

"Good night!" cried Pezo after them and pulled Antonio away from the jinxed place. Another group of curious passers-by descended on them.

"What happened?"

"That Kombol gang member stole the bicycle of the butcher's son and took a thrashing", blurted out Emil, and they all burst again into an irresistible laughter. Emil pulled up his glasses which had slid down his nose as he laughed.

"Look at him! He has a girl's haircut. Who is he? Where did he get Zok's bicycle?" spoke the Kombol gang members with mixed amazement and relief. The boys soon flitted away into the night, down the street, like elusive birds.

Only the rustling of Antonio's feather jacket could be heard during that late night walk along the silent street. Antonio wiped the wet traces of tears from his grimy face with a yellow sleeve.

"Okay, boy, you have survived your move to Kombol Street!" Pezo tried to save the situation with these words. Antonio's spirit fell again. The injustice hurt.

"I'm doctor Pezo! I'm the doctor for the whole street. I treat both small animals and people. You know, animals are like people. Well, people are also sometimes like animals. You are a new arrival

in the neighbourhood... So, welcome. This is nevertheless a fine and quiet neighbourhood", his rescuer with his dark hat on tried to cheer him up. The vet showed him that he had reached his car. He had a white station wagon with a blue inscription: ZOOMOBILE - ANIMAL TRANSPORT.

"My vet clinic is at the end of the street, so come and see me some time. If you find a stray dog, bring it so that I can wash and comb it", the smiling vet invited him before he entered the zoomobile. He started his car and blew a greeting with a horn.

Pezo looked more like a wizard than like a vet. Antonio had a feeling that he had dreamed all that. But the right knee throbbed painfully from the bleeding wound. The pain was hot and shooting. It showed him that he was not dreaming. Worst of all, nobody will believe him when he tells them what had happened. 'Dad will say that I'm making things up because of our moving. Mom will shout that I picked a fight. And Kraljević can't help me', thought injured Antonio.

His teeth clenched, he limped towards the white residential building, his new home, with two lit entrances, 85A and 85B. The paved square in front of the building was illuminated quite brightly. Antonio saw the bright light even from a distance. The light told him that he was finally safe and that he would soon enter his flat, his room, snuggle under his quilt.

A familiar whistle cut his thoughts short. He spotted a group of Kombol gang members in front of the building. He recognized the kids he had seen at Bundek and their muddy bicycles. They were all waiting for him. Big Emil with his black glasses and the whole gang with blue caps on their heads made them appear even more

numerous. The icy silence was broken by their jeering. And then he heard Snake's hoarse voice.

"Thief, thief...", chanted Snake from under his black hood.

"THIEF! THIEF! THIEF!THIEF!" the gang immediately took up the taunting. All hell broke loose. The gang turned into a loud, well-trained choir of football fans.

"THIEF! THIEF! THIEF! THIEF!"

Antonio had to pass through them to get to his entrance, 85A. The compact line of dark fan jackets treated him to a dozen vicious fillips while he was blazing his trail through them, tense, silent, his head thrust in his hands, and hurried towards the entrance.

"THIEF!" yelled Hornet, stepped closer and gave him a nasty fillip close to his ear. He had Antonio's blue ski cap on his head.

"*Rat!*" Hornet's penetrating voice bounced off the glass door which offered Antonio refuge in his flight. He rushed into the lift. The entrance door closed automatically. On the other side the Kombol gang members banged loudly on the glass door.

"*Rat! Rat! Rat!*" The words seem to hit the glass door. They stuck their noses against the glass and looked like pigs while they mocked him. The metal door of the lift closed and they finally disappeared from view. As the lift started Antonio felt the top of his head throb because of the strong fillips.

As he got out of the third floor with tearful eyes, he still held his red ear and his dishevelled hair. With trembling hands he quickly unlocked the door with the name plate *Kosir* and rushed in like a mouse into its hole. He didn't want to leave it any more.

CHAPTER TWO

A MERE SCRATCH WITH CLOTTED BLOOD

"You'll be fine here, you'll see". Antonio's mom Mirela worriedly pampered her listless son. She arranged his pillows behind his back and once more caressed his golden tussled hair and fixed his helmet haircut. Antonio rudely shook his head trying to get rid of his mother's hand.

There were scratches all over his nose, cheeks and forehead. He looked as if a cat with the sharpest claws had jumped into his face.

"What happened, son? Did you get into a fight? Why are you so scratched? You've never fought so far! Why now, all of a sudden?" Mom kept asking while she examined his face in every detail. And her examination was infinitely long.

He said he had a headache. With a painful grimace he added that he had a sore throat and faked a cough. His father, a medical doctor, was away on business. Antonio intended to make up an excuse in order to avoid going to school and meeting the members of the Kombol gang. He easily convinced his frightened mom that it would be best for him to spend the next day in bed even if he had no fever.

"Come on, you'll find *friends...*, said mom with a smile and comforted him with her tender voice. He hated the way she ran her hands through his hair as if he were a baby.

"I'm going to fix you something nice to eat, maybe you'll be in a better mood for a talk after a juicy morsel", said his mother conciliatorily and left his room at last.

Antonio did not want to talk to anyone about his troubles. His parents couldn't understand him anyway. His bedclothes were new. A nice, colourful chequered combination with blue and green squares. Everything here was *new*. The flat and the furniture. And Antonio Kosir. New in Kombol Street, new at school. New wherever he came. And falsely accused for stealing a new *Super Speed* bike. Cool!

The wound on his knee was very painful. It gave him the worst trouble. As soon as he moved even a little, pain would shoot from his knee to his head. He imagined his photograph with a black bruise under his eye and the headline in the papers: "**Boy (11) beaten up by the Kombol gang**". In that case maybe his parent would understand where they had brought him.

"Why don't you take me back to my old school? Ugh!" He felt like screaming. He was so lonely. Miserable and lost, Antonio fell asleep.

The next morning Antonio's mom Mirela entered his room. He had slept soundly all night long, and would have slept another half a day if she hadn't waken him up. His mother worked in a bank and she looked at her son frowning. Something didn't add up.

"What happened to your trousers?" She pointed angrily at his new jeans in her hands. They were torn and bloody.

"I was jumping around with the boys... in some bushes... and... fell into a ditch...", lied sleepy Antonio fast.

"And what about the boots?" asked his mother. She also held his muddy boots pasted with leaves.

"I told you, I fell into a ditch!" Antonio angrily turned his eyes towards the wall.

"Let me see your knee, look at all this blood on your trousers!" continued his mother and drew the quilt off Antonio with a single pull. Seeing her imperative look Antonio pulled the leg of his pyjamas over his knee and moaned as the terry cloth slipped across the wound.

"Haaaaa! What were you doing? Why didn't you show it to me right away last night? Your wound is festering! You'll lose your leg! Oh my God! I'm going to call your dad immediately!" She went into the corridor to fetch the phone. "Come on, Mirela, no dramatics! Can't you see that our son has accommodated to his new neighbourhood", said Antonio's father cheerfully. He had just entered the flat. Dr. Zrinko Kosor had returned home and heard everything already at the front door.

"Have you finally found friends?" asked his father and kissed the top of his head. "Come on, show me the knee." He gave his frowning son a friendly tap on the shoulder and sat next to him on the bed.

"It hurts, it hurts, it hurts! Ouch!" yelled Antonio as loud as he could as soon as his father started to move his leg. It hurt so much that he moved his father's hand away with his badly scratched hands.

"Just a moment, sport, let me see your knee." Doctor Kosir worked in the local medical centre. Both his hair and his eyes were jet-black. Fair-haired and blue-eyed Antonio was the spitting image of his mother.

"That's just a mere scratch with some clotted blood", said Antonio's dad. "I'll spray it with some Bivacyn... bandage it and that's all", he added and took out a bandage out of his black leather doctor's bag. Antonio's mom followed all that restlessly behind her husband's head as if she were also dressing the injured knee. Antonio's father sprayed the knee and bandaged it. It already hurt much less. Antonio carefully let down the leg of his brown terry cloth pyjamas.

"He also complained of a sore throat...", continued mom.

"Open your mouth!" said his father holding a wooden tongue depressor for the examination of the throat.

The doctor's eyes gazed deep into Antonio's pharynx. His son was prone to inflammations of the throat. But, as his father saw clearly, this time his son was also prone to lies.

"There's nothing wrong with him."

Antonio's attempt to hide from the Kombol gang for some more days failed. He felt as if ice-cream was melting in his hands.

"You're going to school tomorrow!" said his father firmly, and looked at him with a smile. "Did you fight wild cats?" he asked in amazement. "Where were you? In the jungle?" he asked again and looked at Antonio's mother.

Antonio didn't even think about admitting that he was at BundeK, but he couldn't believe that they were laughing at his scratches. He understood that they had no idea about the dangers of their new neighbourhood. He just sullenly fell silent.

Dad stood up and just pushed mom out of the room. "Let's go and get a nice bite."

As soon as they left, Anton furiously turned in his bed and carelessly banged his bandaged knee against the wall. He frowned

because of sharp pain and the painful grimace didn't leave his face for a long time.

The next morning Antonio was limping considerably. His wound hurt even more the second day. But his father kept claiming that he could safely get to his school with that leg. At seven fifteen he began to get ready for his forced departure.

Unlike the sluggish Antonio, who had just put on his undershirt, his parents were busily getting ready to leave for work. The corridor smelled of dad's aftershave and mom's perfume. When they passed each other in the corridor they kissed once in front of their son. They were both happy. They had exchanged a smaller flat downtown for a larger one in the Utrine district. They had even bought a new small car. Dad quickly put on his dark suit. Eventually, mom also appeared in a dark blue suit with a striped bluish scarf round her delicate neck.

"Son, drink your cocoa while it's warm! And take your cap, it's cold outside!" called mom. Then mom and dad put on their coats and finally left.

'Hornet has my cap', remembered Antonio anxiously while he was drinking his cocoa. Before he left home he put on another black woollen cap. His favorite red boots were waiting for him, clean, greased and shining. Mom had really done a good job.

That Tuesday Antonio unwillingly dragged himself to school. He passed limping among his noisy new classmates. Without greeting anybody he sat at the third desk in the row by the window.

"My, are you scratched!" gaped Marta in amazement, having turned to him from the desk in front of him.

He didn't reply. Because of that Marta pertly swung her long brown hair full of many coloured hair slides and turned her back on him.

His classmates were jumping and raising a racket before the start of class. With his scratched face and helmet haircut Antonio just sat at his desk and stared out of the window. He was thoughtful and silent because he was lost, sad, unhappy... He'd been enrolled in class 5A at an unusual time: at half term.

"Cap off, Matija M.!" shouted the petite geography teacher as she entered the classroom. Hearing the guttural voice of the teacher Antonio sat upright at his desk. Matija M took off his visor cap. Matija was the tallest boy in 5A. He usually wore his red cap the other way round, and the large *M* at the back of the cap stood out above his eyebrows on his forehead. That was the reason for his nickname, M.

Helped by the stocky Matija M the teacher was arranging geographical maps on the blackboard. That day, just as during the past two weeks, Antonio sat alone at his desk. That's why he easily floated away in his thoughts. He didn't even notice that the geography class was over as he awoke during the English class. In his old Ribnjak school they had covered the *Uncle Rob* lesson already before Christmas.

He discontentedly looked at his unfamiliar classmates. Next to Marta there sat Petro with close cropped hair and firm ruddy cheeks. They all called him Russ. He frowned with great surprise when he heard from Mrs. Perić, his form- mistress, that Petro had come from Russia two years ago. He still spoke half Russian. Mrs. Perić taught Croatian and that day, during the third period, she was explaining the accusative.

The kindly form-mistress was short and fat, and she waddled through the classroom with difficulty. That's why they called her Duckie. She was so obese that one could not see the ankles on her thick legs. Because of her thick double chin and fat face her chin looked tiny. She had problems with her thickness just as Petro the Russian with the Croatian language.

"I know... this *dyevoushka*", read Russ.

Perić corrected him and laughed. The two of them got on quite well. They all laughed.

The bell rang. The long break, finally. Bundled up in his yellow jacket Antonio sat alone on a bench in front of the school. His classmates spent the break on the large football and basketball playground. Eventually the bell marked the end of the break. Antonio limped last into the classroom.

That day he was excused at least during physical education because of his knee injury. During the mathematics class he unexpectedly sweated a lot. After he had been staring out of the window, the teacher, Tunjić, captured him and kept him at the blackboard. Antonio's fingers were soiled with chalk, but Tunjić, nicknamed Tunny, did not let him go. The balding teacher explained equations to him. Antonio, his face flushed, struggled hard, but he could not solve a single equation. He felt miserable in front of the blackboard. Tunny finally took pity on him and let him return to his desk.

The last period was the music class and they all sang.

The music teacher was skinny as a skeleton and he played the piano with his bony fingers. Class 5A sang heartily accompanied by his piano. Antonio was just opening his mouth and watching the teacher pretending to sing. The walking skeleton played wearing

only trousers and a shirt. Everything danced on him. The school bell echoed through all the corridors, all the classrooms and toilets like an alarm clock in a box. The Skeleton, as they called him, let the piano lid down. School was finally over for that day.

The name Kosir was carved on the brass name plate on the door of the apartment. Antonio unlocked the door, entered, and slammed the door. Silence welcomed him. His parents were still at work. He threw the knapsack with the books into his room, took a coke out of the refrigerator and poured himself a glass. It was two o'clock in the afternoon. What to do with such a life?

He called his friend Kraljević. He was not at home. Antonio swilled the coke in his mouth. He fancied strudel. He caught on: mom will want apples for the strudel. He had some change in his pocket and decided to go shopping. For the first time he found himself in the neighbouring district of Travno in front of the famous building known as the Mammoth. In disbelief he looked at the wide and tall grey-red monster rising in front of him. Six high rise buildings, each with eighteen storeys combined into a concrete monster. As many as five thousand people lived in the Mammoth. That building was a real small town. There was a bar, *Mammoth*, and a pizzeria, *Four mammoths*, on the ground-floor.

In the shop, also called *Mammoth*, Antonio queued up in front of the check-out counter with his apples. He also bought a new issue of the comic book *Warrior*. He paid everything out of his pocket money. Coming out of the department store he held a paper bag full of apples when he felt a terrible burning sensation by the nail of the right thumb. He groaned. Because of the pain he dropped the comic book. The flesh by the nail hurt as if he had been bitten by a

hundred wasps. He waved his arm through the air to cool the sudden pain.

Little Mammoth peered from behind a willow tree. His thick eyelashes fluttered. The members of the Kombol gang were always dangerous because they were never alone. Yellow-haired Eagle, Emil with the big black glasses and Hornet, the smiling red devil, emerged from behind the trees. They were all here. The tall Snake stood before him. The black hooded apparition stepped closer. Antonio stepped back. He thought hard what to do. What? Quickly! Nothing came to his mind.

He set off right away towards home, and his heart thumped with fear. He had to hold the apples tight in his arms because the paper bag was ripping open as he walked fast. Out of fear he also forgot his painful knee. He walked at a fast lope. He had been expecting something like this. Jeering behind his back, all the members of the Kombol gang hurried after him.

"Don't, please, don't, don't, please... I'm not guilty", whined big Emil imitating Antonio's cry in front of Zok's father. Antonio started to walk faster and faster. The street pigeons flitted off when Antonio rushed down the street as quickly as he could. The apples slid under his elbow and dropped.

"After him!" cried Hornet. The passers-by were in the boys' way. Antonio thought he could escape through the park on Kombol Street.

"Just try and come to our base once again!" Running, Snake hit Antonio on his back. Antonio cried with pain. The pimply Snake threatened him from his hood. He again painfully twisted Antonio's arm on the boy's back and hit him viciously.

"Seven to one! Aren't you ashamed?" shouted doctor Pezo approaching them. Snake immediately let go of Antonio.

"He was in our base!" Hornet managed to out-shout them all. Hell broke loose. They all explained to Pezo what had happened at the top of their voices.

"I just happened to come by!" shouted Antonio fearfully. His nail still hurt.

"So then...", doctor Pezo looked at them through his small red glasses on the tip of his nose. "Did my new friend steal that bicycle as well?" asked he shrewdly. He looked at all of them with a typical look of a vet examining his animals. Pezo knew more than the gang thought. "Come on, boys... break it up!" Pezo cried sharply.

The crestfallen Kombol boys withdrew. Before they left each of them warned Antonio with another menacing look that they would find him again.

"Are you getting bashed all the time?" asked Pezo as he put his red glasses into a small case, and the case into an inner pocket of his coat.

"I haven't done anything against them", answered Antonio with a trembling tearful voice.

Pezo carefully looked at Antonio as if he was checking his honesty. The vet saw that Antonio was looking at something on the other side of the street. Antonio saw the Kombol gang as they enjoyed reading his *Warrior* on a bench in park on the other side of the street.

"They will not leave you at peace just like that. I'll have to defend you again...", concluded Pezo seriously and shook his head under his dark hat. "Come with me to my clinic to see the animals... We'll think of something", added Pezo kindly.

"Well, I could...", answered Antonio eagerly. He could forget the apples. They were strewn all around and crushed. Nevertheless, he was relieved. Pezo had again saved his life. The pigeons returned, and while they were walking along the pavement, everything again looked as if nothing had happened.

When they passed by the Kombol gang in the park, doctor Pezo smiled at the boys, but Antonio's mouth was frozen.

"Can you lend me that comic book?" Pezo gently asked the boys. That way the *Warrior* in Snake's hands was returned to the owner, Antonio, who smiled briefly at Pezo.

In his clinic Pezo took off his hat and put it on the hanger above his coat. Then he told Antonio that he was going to change. He came back in white trousers and a white doctor's jacket. His clogs banged on the tiles. Probably out of habit he stroked his thick, grey wavy hair resembling a lion's mane. His trimmed beard was also grey. He put on his small red glasses exactly half way between the tip of his nose and his eyes. He looked at Antonio's injured thumb, swollen, after being hit by a wire wasp.

"There's some blood here by the nail... Don't worry. The swelling will soon go down, but wait, we'll put something on your small injured paw... There, tomorrow you'll already be a man with five normal fingers." Pezo often laughed at his own jokes. His gentle blue eyes clearly showed that doctor Pezo was a very good man.

"You even didn't tell me your name", asked Pezo, surprised himself.

"Antonio."

"Antonio", repeated Pezo. "Oh, Lujza, Lujza... Let me see you too...", said Pezo gently when Lujza, a black and white cat, appeared before them. She lazily meowed a greeting to Pezo and, her tail upright as if she was carrying an antenna, walked into the premise with the inscription *Operating room*.

Photographs of cats and dogs were hanging all over the walls of the small vet clinic.

"Come on, help me...", said Pezo who had already started to work. He groaned under the weight of large boxes he was lifting. Antonio helped him without a word. They carried heavy boxes from the corridor of the clinic into a small storeroom.

"What's in there?" curiously asked Antonio with full hands.

"Drugs... food for dogs, cats, parrots, iguanas... even I don't know what else", smiled Pezo at the disorder. Antonio looked at him with understanding. He also crammed his cupboard like that. Pezo was barely able to close the door of the full storeroom. Antonio laughed when he heard the sound of falling boxes in the storeroom. Pezo immediately returned to the storeroom and restored order in a moment.

The door of Pezo's clinic was always ajar. Antonio saw Fang. The black shepherd entered pushing the door energetically with his big black head.

"And where have *you* been?" cooed Pezo affectionately.

Antonio stood stiff by the wall. Fang immediately lay down in the corridor and stretched, black and fearful. The dog just lay dejectedly on the tiles in the corridor, with sadness in his brown eyes.

"What's wrong, my friend?" asked Pezo warmly and started to examine the dog's head carefully. Fang suddenly whined woefully

and deeply. The vet searched for the painful spot. He soon found it with his experienced hands. At his touch Fang immediately started howling as a wolf.

"Come on, we must cure you", called Pezo and let Fang into the surgery.

The dog slowly dragged himself after the vet, following his doctor closely.

"Come too!" Pezo called pale Antonio in the surgery. Antonio was still standing glued to the wall in the corridor. He was stiff from his stomach down to his feet.

"He has an ear inflammation", Pezo told him.

Antonio did not move or say anything.

"Come on, Fang, come, my friend." Fang growled with pain and finally sat in the middle of the surgery, whined and turned a suffering look towards Pezo.

"Come, my friend. Antonio and I will examine you. You know, he is my new assistant", told Pezo his four legged patient. As he talked, he was walking round the surgery and preparing everything for ear examination.

Antonio waited until the big dog got on the patients' table at Pezo's order. He dared enter the surgery only then, but did not move further than the door. He startled with fear as soon as the dog moved. At the doctor's order Fang stood up. Pezo grabbed his bushy tail and pushed the thermometer under his tail. He took the dog's temperature, and his patient calmly surrendered to his personal doctor.

"101,8", said Pezo after he had pulled out the thermometer from under the dog's tail. "That's a normal temperature for dogs", said Pezo when he saw Antonio's surprised look. Antonio still

watched Fang as if thunderstruck. The dog still sat patiently on the examination table. He let Pezo hold his head and push long tweezers into his ears several times. Occasionally Fang resisted when he felt pain in his ears, but Pezo just continued to change cotton wool on the tweezers soaking it in a liquid and pushing it again into both ears. The surgery now smelled of a very bitter drug which Pezo had applied to his furry patient. The cotton wool he was taking out from the drooping ears of the stray was dirty, and when Pezo pushed such a dark piece of cotton wool under Antonio's nose, the boy stepped back because of the strong stench.

"Dear God, is there anything but filth in you? Ah!" said Pezo and frowned. Fang did not move. Pezo kept throwing the dirty pieces of cotton wool pulled from the dog's ears into a trash can. Then he again looked into Fang's ears with an instrument. The dog squeezed his eyes with pain and whined as if he were crying. With all the pain he behaved just like a man and even his muzzle assumed a human expression. Antonio suddenly felt sorry for the dog. He frowned sympathetically as Fang whined even more loudly and miserably.

"Come on, help me", Pezo told Antonio. "Hold him a little..." Pezo said that with his back turned as he was taking something out of the medical cabinet. "I must give him an injection."

"I do not dare...", admitted Antonio timidly.

"You do not dare", repeated Pezo.

Pezo quickly prepared the syringe and injected the dog. Fang did not moan as if he were waiting for all that to be over. As soon as he pulled out the needle, Pezo let the dog jump off the table.

"You really don't know anything about dogs. As you have seen this one even comes to see the doctor on his own! Come, caress him,

here, on his head. Strays like being cuddled." Pezo led the frozen Antonio close to the dog.

Enjoying Pezo's cuddling, the dog turned to the frightened Antonio. His tongue hung out, and he turned again, panting, to the other side and looked at Pezo.

"All strays need is a little attention, some food and some water", said Pezo. He opened a big tin with chicken in gravy and gave it to Antonio to feed Fang. Antonio tried to overcome his fear and took the tin from Pezo's hand. His hands trembled as he dumped the food from the tin into the dog's dish. The dog swallowed with relish everything Antonio had dumped into his dish, stood in front of him and wagged his tail. He licked his jowls asking for more. Pezo gave Antonio another tin.

While the dog was happily munching his chicken a big tiger tom cat attracted Antonio's attention. The cat entered ignoring the shepherd and stretched on the brown floor tiles, from his moustached head to the tail in the middle of the surgery.

"Oho! Ivica!" said Pezo and picked him up, pliant and soft, into his arms. In Pezo's lap Ivica soon fell asleep.

"Look at him, he was just a kitten recently and now he has learned the charms of life. He chases cats all day long. Ivica is born for love", said Pezo as he stroked the sleeping tom cat.

After he had eaten his fill, Fang suddenly and slowly approached Antonio. He came closer. And quite close.

"Don't be afraid", said Pezo. The dog came quite close to the frozen Antonio. For a moment Antonio and the dog looked at each other. The dog then blinked, sat down and put his head on Antonio's lap. Fang turned into something warm, something soft, something that melted Antonio's heart. He made peace with Fang as he stroked

the dog's thick, cool, smelly fur with his timid hand. He drew his hand back as soon as the dog moved because he still didn't believe him. But for Antonio life was no longer as black as that dog.

"He almost bit me in that camp", he admitted to Pezo stroking Fang's motionless head.

"But he didn't", stressed the vet. "He is not dangerous."

"No, he didn't", said Antonio. The large dog dozed on his feet. He then doubled up and slept soundly. The drops Pezo gave him relieved pain and the animal could calmly close his furry eyelids. Pezo was an excellent doctor. In his clinic a dog and a cat slept close to each other.

That day the vet had no other patients. He enrolled Antonio in the Animal Friends Society and gave him a blue membership card. Pezo also stamped the card.

"For the first year the membership fee is on me! After that you will pay it yourself if you decide to remain a member. During the first year you are supposed to take part in joint actions for saving and caring for abandoned animals. That is the obligation of every Kombol Street resident!" concluded Pezo.

"Are those boys in the Kombol gang also members?!" shrieked Antonio.

"Yes, all those living in Kombol Street", answered Pezo quietly. Pezo thought for a moment and then continued. "People who love animals, like those boys, can't be bad. There must be something good in them!" The old vet looked at Antonio, his eyes expressing pleasure, and nodded confirming his wise words. Antonio did not believe him and frowned.

Something incredible happened the following Monday. Who would have thought that Antonio and Zok would be sitting at the same desk?

Zok had no gauze and plaster on his eye which Antonio remembered from that ghastly night which he wanted to forget for ever.

"Zok, you're back!" cried enthusiastically the slicked Marko Cukerić. In his glossy black hair he always had two pounds of gel. He sat at the desk behind Antonio.

"That's him!" Zok pointed his finger at Antonio showing him to the slicker Marko. Antonio gaped.

"*He* returned the bike. He was in the base of the Kombol gang!" exclaimed Zok. Marko raised his eyebrows. The whole class turned silent and looked at confused Antonio. Matija M's mouth fell open as he looked at the guy who had dared to enter the base of the Kombol gang.

"Break it up!" shouted Tunjić and banged the roll-book on his desk. He surprised them all. Antonio sat stiffly upright at his desk.

In a single step Russ dropped his bag with the books on the floor, quickly sat next to Marta at the desk in front of Antonio and froze. Zok sat next to Antonio.

They copied with great dedication the mathematical equations which Tunny was writing in total silence, without saying a word, on the blackboard with a creaking piece of chalk. Confused by the sudden encounter at the same desk, Antonio looked furtively at Zok from under his fair helmet haircut. He could clearly see the scar caused by the wasp above his eye. A red swollen line stretched across the right eyelid and intersected the eyebrow. Zok wore round glasses with a thin blue metal frame. His head was framed by thick

and curly black hair. He was skinny and he could have used some extra pounds, as could clearly be seen under his wide green T-shirt. Antonio wondered why Zok understood immediately the mathematical problems Tunny was writing fast on the blackboard. He was even more surprised when he saw Tunny discussing mathematical problems with Zok in a very friendly way. The two of them had a solution for even the most complicated mathematical problems. Zoran Malovan was the favorite of all the teachers. The best student in the class.

'What an eager beaver', thought Antonio and his face expressed disgust. He kept that expression wherever he went in New Zagreb. Every now and then he would stealthily look at Zok with disapproval. But Zok did not even notice him during the mathematics class. He just stared at the blackboard and was absorbed by Tunny's actions. He followed the trace of the chalk while the teacher was solving the equations. Zok was the only one to raise his hand when the teacher called for volunteers for the next problem. 'Wow, what an eager beaver...', Antonio again followed him disbelievingly with his eyes wide open. Zok was already in front of the blackboard soiled all over with chalk, including his fingers and his glasses which he was continuously pushing up his nose. He proudly wrote the correct solution and wiped his hand on his jeans leaving a trace of chalk on them as well.

As soon as the bell rang the extraordinary Zok confused Antonio.

"I wanted to tell you...", he started and sneezed. "I wanted to tell you...", he sneezed again.

"I wanted to tell you...", and he sneezed again and again. Zok sneezed four times. Five times. Six times. "I'm allergic...", said Zok

helplessly and sneezed again. He kept sneezing and wiping his nose as he spoke to Antonio. Antonio looked at Zok's glasses with chalk stains.

"I'm sorry that dad attacked you. The old man is ashamed now", barely managed Zok because he sneezed again. For the eighth time. For the first time Antonio smiled at somebody in his new class. The eager beaver with his soiled glasses held out his hand and they clicked immediately. When Marko joined them something incredible happened. By spring Zok, Antonio and Marko became inseparable friends.

Somebody whistled. Zok was looking up at Antonio as he stood on his third floor balcony.

"Are you coming out?" shouted Zok on a sunny Saturday in March. He sat on his golden-yellow *Super 21 Speed*.

Antonio rushed through the apartment as he looked for his keys. Then he waited to get his pocket money which dad doled out every Saturday: his twenty.

"There, you see", dad told mom as he counted out the coins to his son. "You worried so much and you, son, protested so much because of our moving here... And you already found a friend... and another one, and you'll find a third one..."

Zok rang the bell downstairs.

"Come on, dad! Give mi the dough!" shouted Antonio as Zok impatiently rang the bell again.

"Take your cardigan!" called out his mother.

Slicked Marko was also waiting on his bike and the three friends rushed all over Siget, Zapruđe and Travno. They returned to

Utrine late in the afternoon exhausted by the long and mad ride through the districts of New Zagreb.

Hungry and thirsty, they entered the *Sport* pastry shop and ordered a king size coupe of ice cream and whipped cream, twenty-five balls. They shared the bill. They were really a likeable crowd.

"Will you be able to manage that?" asked Špejtim, the owner, as he placed the giant ice cream coupe on the table. He liked the ear-splitting enthusiasm with which the boys welcomed the ice cream mountain. Špejtim had decorated the ice cream with a whipped cream tower and added crisp biscuits. He also brought them three glasses of water.

"Dig in!" exclaimed Marko, and then, followed by Zok and Antonio, dug into the coupe with long spoons. With tearful eyes and a running nose, without his glasses which he had taken off and laid on the table, Zok stopped eating and started to sneeze, unable to stop.

"I'm aaallergic to strawberries..."

"Eat the chocolate", said Marko.

"I'm also aaallergic to chocolate..."

"Eat the vanilla", suggested Antonio.

Between the curly black-haired Zok and the slick black-haired Marko, the fair-haired Antonio was as white as vanilla.

Zok ate a ball of hazel nut ice cream and kept sneezing all the time. He sneezed and wiped his nose more than he ate. Marko and Antonio enjoyed the ice cream and chatted.

"Last year", said Marko proudly, "I was the best goalgetter in the Dinamo boys' league."

"Man!" replied Antonio across the ice cream coupe scraping the last chocolate and banana from the bottom. "A Dinamo forward!"

You are a real pro!" Antonio finally realized why the slick was the chief good-looker in class. All the girls fancied him.

As he looked through the window of the pastry shop, Zok saw the Kombol gang rushing by on their bikes. He shouted and pointed at them.

"Hey, you are getting on my nerves with these Kombol boys! You should live in Zaprude and see what a real gang looks like!" remarked Marko.

"And how do you defend yourself from them?" Antonio waited carefully for the answer.

"I run", said Marko laughing. Both Antonio and Zok laughed aloud too. But they were not satisfied with the advice.

They parted in front of the pastry shop. Marko rushed off on his bike towards Zaprude. Zok dashed on his *Super 21 Speed* towards Barčev prilaz and Antonio rode slowly down the dark Kombol Street to his building.

By spring his bangs had grown so much that they covered his eyes. His hair, no longer looking like a helmet, reached almost his shoulders and fluttered during the ride.

He kept turning around, expecting the undulating Kombol whistle. But tonight he was in for a great surprise. There was no Kombol gang member in sight. The silence forced Antonio to look around even more carefully while he rode alone. He slid through the park, careful as a bristling cat running from dogs. He could not believe that he got to his building in one piece.

A fair-haired girl in a pink dress skated on the square in front of his building. Her beautiful long golden locks swung as she skated by. She danced, she skated, and for a time he had the impression that he was watching her in the dance hall, or on a skating rink. As

he was getting off the bike she looked at him with her green eyes: the two most beautiful springs of clear rivers. She skated as if she were born on skates and suddenly slid into entrance 85B. She disappeared like a butterfly. Antonio immediately asked himself the question any enchanted boy would ask faced with such a beauty:

'Who is she?'

Things took a turn for the worse. When he arrived at school, Antonio took out from his knapsack a heavy package wrapped in several layers of paper and pasted with Scotch tape. He impatiently tore the paper. He pulled out a large flat stone on which two words were written with a black felt pen:

WATCH YOUR STEP

K.

Marko also looked at the package. Zok put his glasses on.

"It's the Kombol gang. You see this K", Zok explained something everybody could see even without any glasses. Without a word the three of them turned almost at the same moment towards the school sports ground looking for the gang. The girls were playing tag nearby and kids were shouting or whistling around during the break. But there were no cads on the sports ground.

"Come on, they can't harm you in school", Marko spoke first and took the heavy stone from Antonio's hand.

"I don't think they will attack me in school", replied Antonio.

Zok grasped the stone firmly, sneezed and wiped his nose with the palm of his hand.

"Where is that base of theirs at BundeK?" asked Marko.

"Ugh! You must reach it through brushwood...", said Antonio.

"Let's go there and break everything!" urged Marko. Hearing Marko's determined words Zok sneezed six times.

"We don't have to follow them all the way to BundeK", said Zok and sneezed for the seventh time. "We should see Dreadful instead", he said and sneezed again.

"Come on, that's really stupid", said Antonio. "What should I tell the headmaster?"

"If you don't want to see Dreadful, tell your dad to come to school", advised Zok.

'Even if I showed him the stone, dad would think I wrote this stupid thing on the stone myself because I don't like living in Utrine', thought Antonio.

"Yes, there's no other way. I'll tell dad", suddenly answered Antonio and sighed. Zok spread his arms and looked at him with approval. What else could be done?

Immediately after school Marko hurried to Maksimir for a training session. Zok had to go home because of a red allergic rash on his skin.

With the knapsack on his shoulder Antonio reached the news stand in Kombol Street alone. He looked at the displayed comic books. He still had some pocket money left in his jeans to pay for *Diabolik*.

"Got any dough to lend me?" He heard the Snake's hoarse voice behind his back. He had size 11 trainers on his feet, and as usual was dressed in black. With a hostile look Snake stretched coolly his hand towards Antonio expecting the sponged change. He

squinted at Antonio with his evil eyes. Antonio's jeans grew tighter and tighter as he desperately tried to find another coin in them.

"I don't have any...", he said through his clenched teeth.

"Well, if you don't..." Snake looked at him coldly from under his black hood. Antonio dared peep under the hood. Snake had pimples on his forehead, on his nose, on his chin and cheeks, on his neck, all over.

"You must pay with something!" Snake tore the knapsack with the books off Antonio's shoulder and moved on down the street. Feeling miserably Antonio ran after him.

"Give it back to me!" He shouted angrily. That was too much.

"Come on... Come and take it..." The pimply Snake turned towards him and baited him to approach. The whole Kombol gang approached behind Snake's back. Teasing started. The boys tossed Antonio's knapsack around while Antonio ran headlong after it trying to retrieve it.

"Give me back my knapsack!"

"Let's return the bag to the monkey."

"Dunk!!!"

Antonio's grey knapsack with his schoolbooks ended up in the empty, deep street trash container. The panting Antonio quickly jumped into the container. Pleased with the result the Kombol gang disappeared laughing.

Bent in the container Antonio choked because of the intolerable stench which made him vomit. He trampled on the remainder of the trash: scattered white beans, mouldy green bread, rotten potatoes, a broken glass jar which threatened to cut him. He stood in rancid fat and on egg shells. His grey knapsack was among all that. It was all slimy and Antonio was seized by desperation. He

had only one thought on his mind: to run from here, to run before anybody saw him. He prepared to jump out of the container.

As soon as he got one leg out of the container, she was the first person he saw. The golden-haired beauty who had enchanted him the other day. She had seen everything and skated away laughing. Moving away she turned to look at him and kept laughing. Antonio barely managed to get out of the smelly trash. His face was never so fiery red. Crestfallen and ashamed, he crossed the street. His boots left a slimy track behind him. There were stinking stains all over him when he reached house No. 1.

'And where is doctor Pezo now?' wondered Antonio uneasily. His face was still red even after a short walk. Why was the door of the clinic locked?

Working hours:

8 - 12 a.m. and 3 - 7 p.m.

Saturdays:

9 a.m. - 2 p.m.

EMERGENCIAS BY APPOINTMENT

Fang was in the yard and he jumped close to Antonio, put his forelegs on his shoulder and gave him a welcome lick. Already used to good-natured big dog, Antonio stroke his head and back. Fang trotted behind him all the way to the fence round the yard. He angrily slammed the small gate on the fence. The dirty knapsack hung on his shoulder. It stank as if he were carrying a dead rat on his back. It was soaked with that disgusting brown slime. Fang looked at him sadly, sat down on his hind legs and whined the boy goodbye.

Tram No. 6 crossed the river Sava. It clattered loudly as it drove on the long bridge. Frowning and still red Antonio swayed in the blue tram car. He had left Kombol Street. And New Zagreb. He had left everything that tormented him.

When he reached Ribnjak it was still daylight. He didn't find any friends. He also missed Kraljević's school shift. Only small kids on the swing and sliding down the toboggan shrieked in the park.

Bored, he sat long in the park and read yellowish, faded and torn advertisements posted on a street lamp: *Two room flat on sale. Private mathematics, chemistry and physics lessons. Foreign language courses: German, English, Italian, Spanish, French;* and then, he suddenly stood up and approached a poster:

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE BIG AND STRONG TO WIN
Enrolment in the "Sakura" judo club every workday from 4 to 6 p.m.
in the club premises, Nova Ves 9

The poster attracted him because of the drawing of a strong fighter in a white fighting kimono with a black belt. The strong figure stood firm above the fiercely thrown opponent.

'Well, that's an idea for defence from the Kombol gang!' thought Antonio with his eyes wide open.

CHAPTER THREE

JAN ZELI

"How do I look?"

Mom moved away from the kitchen range when Antonio burst into the kitchen in the just purchased white kimono. "You are barefoot on cold tiles!"

"Judokas walk barefoot!" answered proudly Antonio still standing in front of his mom.

"That will be just great for your throat and bladder!"

"Moom! Tell me how I look!" exclaimed Antonio putting his hands on his hips. He had tied the white beginner's judo belt tightly round his waist. He felt invincible!

"Well, you look somehow stronger..."

"I look stronger. Ha!!!" He liked what he'd heard. "Aha...!" He shouted again full of strength as he ran down the corridor into his room.

Thunder pealed loudly. Antonio shuddered when lightning struck close to their house. It sounded as if the sky had broken above their heads. The window panes clanged because of the fierce shock.

"You wouldn't believe that it's spring!" said the frightened Mirela to herself. She gazed at the spring storm through the open fanlight over the balcony door. The outside temperature had dropped by ten degrees. It got very cold and Mirela was afraid that Antonio would get soaked and catch a cold before he reached Ribnjak in such weather. While she prepared lunch the fair-haired head of Mrs.

Kosir was surrounded by steam all the time because she was braising onion in a pan.

Antonio paced in his room with the phone in his hand. In his kimono and tight judo belt he still felt stronger. "Imagine, mom's afraid that I will learn how to fight in the judo club...", laughed Antonio talking to Kraljević. The storm was still raging outside the window of his room. He even felt a little scared when he looked at the sky.

"Come and see the old class as well..."

"If I can make it." Antonio looked again at a black, menacing cloud as a flash of a lightning struck from it.

"Let me know how they beat you up at the training session", answered Kraljević laughing on the phone.

"No problem", laughed Antonio too. "And I'll also let you know when I fix the Kombol gang!" said Antonio and hung up. "I'll throw them all over the street like sacks!" he added to himself.

Everything was working up perfectly. He was to have his judo training sessions in the sports hall of his old Ribnjak school. So he would be able to see Kraljević more often. A flash of lightning lit the room. Antonio saw his reflection in the window pane. He really looked fine in the kimono. Pleased with himself he smiled and conceived a dangerous plan he would soon test on two of his new friends.

'Slick Marko will be scared when I send him flying across the football ground with a judo throw... And eager beaver Zok will be shocked when he sees me in the kimono...' Antonio smiled. He kept looking at his image in the window pane.

'I'll become the king of Kombol Street!' he concluded finally. In front of the big mirror in the corridor he squinted and looked

viciously at his reflection in the mirror. At that moment dad came home from work.

"Wow!" he shouted in surprise seeing his son in the kimono and dropped his doctor's bag on the floor.

"Haaaaaa!!!" shouted dad at the top of his voice and suddenly assumed a combat pose in front of Antonio.

"Yay!" With a fighting grimace on his face dad displayed a range of martial art movements.

"Yay!" He shouted in the corridor and in the kitchen, swinging his arms and legs. Dad was cutting the air with strong movements as if someone had switched on a giant fan.

Eventually Zrinko Kosir knocked down a glass. It broke. Antonio gaped without a word.

"Aah!!!" screamed mom and a kitchen spoon dropped from her hand. "You are crazier than him!" she blustered. She quickly scooped up the glass shards, out of her mind when she remembered that Antonio was still barefoot. She dumped the broken glass into a trash can. "I can only imagine what this one will learn at the karate course! We will have no intact glass in this house! That's a fine sport you picked for him!" she kept shouting at her husband.

"Mom, I'm not taking karate but judo. They don't break glasses there!" protested Antonio.

"You'll just get a good thrashing there, you'll see", Mirela looked angrily at Zrinko. Dad just winked looking at his son. Antonio sullenly left and went to his room to change.

"Yummy... this smells nice, *dear*", said dad and stuck his nose into the pan.

Mom looked like a bristling cat ready to scratch.

"But, *dear...* Cezar also trained judo. Just in the Sakura club. That is a judo club with the greatest number of trophies!" He cooed up to her like a hungry cat.

"Cezar?" asked Antonio who had come into the kitchen, his big blue eyes wide open in surprise. Cezar was an orthopedic surgeon, broad-shouldered and strong like an elephant. He was a very good friend of dad's. Antonio had rushed into the kitchen half-dressed, in a long-sleeved striped red-blue T-Shirt and white judo pants. Dad looked at him furtively and winked. He was showing Antonio that they still had problems with mom. Antonio frowned because *dad* had got him in trouble.

"Oh yes... yes... yes... he was a very good judoka... My friend Cezar was the national judo champion twice. I also trained with him for a while..."

"Really?" Antonio looked at his father to see whether there was even a bit of truth in dad's lies. "But... I was not good... I began to train when I was somewhat older... as a university student", dad was trying to justify himself, "but if I had been as young as you are..."

"Let him eat if you want him to get to that training at five!" ordered mom. Father and son obediently set the table and started to eat the soup. They blew into every spoon to cool the hot and very fine soup.

Thick clouds sank very low and the sky rumbled outside the window. Like a bolt from the blue mom spoke up: "Why didn't you enrol him into a water-polo club? He would swim, develop physically... and they play with a ball..."

Dad shrugged.

'How could I defend himself from the Kombol gang with a water-polo cap and swimming trunks?' thought Antonio and looked at his mother, amazed and disappointed.

After lunch Antonio carefully folded his stiffly starched, snow-white new kimono and put it into his red sports bag. Mom added a sweat towel and a hair dryer. Antonio angrily took out the hair dryer as soon as mom got out of the room.

"Don't forget to take the umbrella!" Mom was standing at the door with her many-coloured floral umbrella. Antonio already held a black man's umbrella in his hand.

"Don't get hit there!"

"Bye, mom!" he told her bent under the heavy sports bag on his shoulder. And then, turning his back on her, Antonio only rolled his eyes.

As he left the building it was raining cats and dogs and the rain created a large watery curtain. Antonio opened his black umbrella like a shield. The rain drummed above his head as if he were carrying a drum band.

Booooooom... The sound of thunder followed Antonio down Kombol Street. He ran to the tram station to catch tram No. six, but he missed it. That day nothing could make him give up judo.

He got to the Ribnjak school at five to five p.m., as the shower was at its worst, wringing wet and soaked to the skin. The high school windows reflected the grey storm which tore branches and broke many umbrellas. He had no time to visit his former class, 5D.

The weight of the sports bag was chafing his shoulder. He changed its position and started off towards the sports hall. At the

last moment he entered the full and noisy men's locker room. The racket inside was incredible. At least twenty judokas were changing quickly amidst the din, and many were entering the hall in their kimonos.

WHAM! They were going out through the other locker room door which banged loudly behind them.

Antonio set down the soaked bag at the end of the long yellow bench. He bent in the corner and began to untie his wet boots. He took out his new kimono and started to dress as did the others shouting cheerfully and throwing clothes at one another. The older boys tied their orange, green and blue belts.

Wham!

Wham!

Wham! They disappeared into the hall one after the other.

Antonio successfully concealed his bungling attempts to tie his white belt properly.

"Come on, stop, you *mohrrrons!*" said Mario loudly. He could not pronounce his r's clearly. Next to him the Segedi twins, Teo and Leo, were quarrelling noisily. They were all the time pushing each other and quarrelling over their kimonos.

Tough Mario was just pushing his foot into the leg of the kimono pants and remained standing on one leg when the quarrelling twins pushed him. The older judoka unexpectedly slammed on his rump on the hard floor tiles.

"Eh, now I'll *bhrrreak* you!" shouted Mario, still in his underpants, with one leg in the kimono pants, and jumped to his feet. Because of the sudden pain, he furiously kicked the nearest twin in his bum. Leo groaned loudly. His twin brother Teo laughed at everything, including his own brother, like a chirping bird.

His fair hair trimmed short, Mario was a twelve-year-old boy who took his judo seriously. He quickly tied his orange belt and dashed angrily through the door.

Wham! Wham!

After a short letdown, bedlam again broke loose in the locker room. The sudden insufferable clamouring of the boys with yellow belts surprised Antonio and made him turn away from the wall.

"Fatso! Fatso!" the prankish twins, Leo and Teo, set upon a plump boy in the locker room. As soon as the boy stripped down to his underpants, the twins started pointing at his flabby stomach with their index fingers. "Nikola, fatso! Nikola, fatso!" mocked the unstoppable brothers unpleasantly at the top of their voices. The plump boy just stared at the floor without a word. Filip and Dino also started to tease him. The cries of those ten-year-olds created an unbearable noise. Suffering and speechless, and red in the face, Nikola put on his kimono with great effort. It was almost too tight for him. He also toiled as he was tying the ends of his white belt over his stomach. It almost turned out to be short. Nikola inhaled deeply, pulled in his stomach and managed to tie the belt. Waddling because of his thickness, his head down, he left the locker room energetically. The door banged again.

Filip and Dino pushed each other through the door hurrying after Nikola. They were followed by the rushing and noisy Teo and Leo, brothers with the same faces, same height, same yellow belts.

"Look, a sissy!" shouted Leo and laughed and pointed at Antonio, the new judoka.

After this sting Leo disappeared from the locker room. Antonio shook his bangs off his eyes. The locker room was finally empty.

He again tried to tie his belt. He tied it time and time again, and it was continuously getting undone. It got entangled, then disentangled and got entangled again. First it was too tight and then too loose. Finally, after all that trouble, he also left the locker room, the last one to do so. He heard the old door slam behind him.

The hall resounded with the noise of children's feet. The boys ran up and down playing tag. Loud whistles and whizzing sounds echoed around. They also engaged in a strange judo-cowboy game and enjoyed brandishing their judo belts as lassoes. Yellow, orange, green and white belts whizzed past Antonio's feet. Neven yelped pretending that Filip had lashed him on his back more vigorously than he actually did. But nobody believed him. Nevertheless, Antonio got out of their way and backed against the wall.

"Nikola, fatso! Nikola, fatso!"

Nikola cried painfully because he got a good lashing on his chubby legs. And then he also started chasing Leo i Teo. Nikola was heavy and slow and could not catch anyone. While he ran, his large stomach bounced as if he had a balloon full of water under the undone kimono. Antonio found the cowboy shouting and rushing interesting, and he followed them with amused eyes.

"Hey... See how this one has tied his belt!" yelled the panting, roguish Leo pointing at Antonio. "Hey... hey... LOOK!" he bellowed urging them to come. The sweaty judokas in their dishevelled kimonos gathered round Antonio. He had tied his belt, which was too long, as best he could.

"Braid your hair!" Antonio heard Leo's voice.

"What do you know, we have a new judoka girl", shouted somebody else.

All the crew-cut boys laughed loudly. Antonio's face flushed with shame. Their laughter did not stop. Confused, Antonio shook his hair. He blushed. There was no end to their roaring laughter.

"In line, *judokas!*" a strong voice resounded in the hall, as Jan Zeli entered with his black judo belt round the white kimono. He loudly clapped his hands and the sharp sound echoed in the hall.

"Step it up!" The voice of the coach appeared to come from a PA system. Walking steadily, Jan Zeli introduced deep silence breaking all talks. His short black hair was silver-streaked above his ears.

A white line of tight, neatly tied kimonos stood in front of the coach. A military hush fell. The boys stared steadily ahead.

'But...!', a thought rushed through Antonio's head. 'This giant standing before me, no... no, he can't be real.' It was the man from that poster, from the street lamp in the Ribnjak park!

With a gentle gesture the man invited him to join the line. The broad-shouldered, brawny and tall coach expected Antonio to carry out his order immediately. With his long bangs Antonio clumsily hurried to join the line. He stepped on his belt and tripped but did not fall.

"*Mohrrron!*" whispered Mario at the same moment.

Sizing up the long-haired Antonio, Filip and Dino frowned and as soon as the fair-haired newcomer stood between them, started to push him slowly out of the line with their shoulders. Confused, Antonio remained a step out of the line. The boys were arranged according to the colour and the rank of their belts. And he had pushed his way into the line according to his height, just as during physical education at school.

Antonio's face blazed again, and he looked like a tomato in a kimono. They all found him funny.

"Silence!" exclaimed Zeli and frowned. His thick black eyebrows joined into a remarkable line when he looked sternly at his judokas.

Nobody laughed any more. Coach Zeli , pointing his index finger, showed Antonio to join the end of the line. Followed by the coach's quiet gaze Antonio pattered to his place. His belt dangled to the floor like spaghetti.

Nikola stood down there, with a white judo belt, barely tight, across his tense stomach. Antonio stood wearily next to him; he was the last in the line. The hall grew silent again. There was tension in the air and Antonio felt a sense of expectation. Zeli briefly looked at Danijel, the first and the oldest in the line. The teenager, with a downy moustache which just started to grow under his nose, took a deep breath.

"*Rei!*" shouted Danijel sharply. The window panes and even the walls vibrated when the boys returned the Japanese greeting. The greyish-haired Jan Zeli then bowed slowly with the upper part of the body and his head to the judoka line. All the little judokas seriously returned the bow to coach Zeli. Antonio quickly followed the example of the other boys. As he bowed, his hair fell across his eyes and he had to move it away like a girl.

'They really ape the Japanese', thought Antonio taken by surprise. He listened to the solemn silence. Only a fly could be heard in the hall. But there were no flies around. He had never experienced such silence, not even in school with the sternest teachers. Coach Zeli could be older than his dad Zrinko, but Zeli

was much taller. Whenever he looked at him, the coach appeared to be taller and taller and now he had almost reached the ceiling.

"You have the U14 judoka competition in Maribor waiting for you", spoke up the strong coach. The giant paced while he spoke, and the mat sagged under his big bare feet.

Antonio's eyes were still wide open with surprise. He bent to look at the first boys in the line. Danijel and Ivan, big thirteen-year-olds, with their marine-blue judo belts, tightened round the white kimonos, stood faultlessly upright and very proud in front of the coach. Apart from the coach's black belt their blue belts were sign of the highest rank in the club. Next to them stood strong boys with forest-green, sparkling orange belts, and then the youngest boys with bright yellow belts. At the end were the beginners with the first white belts, totally invisible on their white kimonos. They looked a little scared as if they didn't know what lay in wait for them.

"There's still a lot of time before the competition. All you have to do is train. Come rain or come shine... or wind... and even when it rains cats and dogs, attend the training sessions! You don't have to think about who will go and who will not... As usual, the best will go!" concluded coach Zeli.

The boys acknowledged his words with silence. Many of them nodded showing that they had understood everything. Nikola nodded more than the other boys.

The sounds of the storm and thunder could still be heard outside the high windows of the hall.

"Come on! Warming-up!" ordered Zeli loudly and clapped his hands.

Hearing the explosive sound all the judokas turned left. The column of the boys started off like a train and started to run in a

circle. The beginners also ran. Antonio was the last to take off. The circle had spread round the hall and the boys were running more and more quickly. And even more quickly. They began to circle round the hall for the third time. Their feet drummed on the mats.

"Puff... puff... puff...", panted the chubby Nikola. It was hard going for him.

Nikola trod heavily the floor like an elephant. Antonio followed nimbly behind the sweating and panting Nikola. The long ends of his white belt flapped in the air behind him. He couldn't do anything with this poorly tied belt which kept fluttering in the air and getting between his legs.

The door of the locker room slammed loudly. All the running boys turned their heads towards the door.

"Judoka Hornet! You're late!" shouted coach Zeli at the red-haired boy who started to run with them.

'That's not possible!', thought Antonio almost aloud. He first thought that he hadn't heard the words well. His heart sped up crazily. He thought he hadn't seen well. He had to convince himself with his own eyes once again. Running, he looked askance and saw him again. Hornet was really here. Totally confused, he kept running with the judokas round the hall. Everything round him was spinning and his mind was reeling. Antonio was the last in the line. Hornet had not seen him yet. Or had he? He was not sure. And then, just one look was enough. He was sure now. Hornet was astonished, too.

'What is this rat doing here?' wondered the freckled Hornet as he ran along and frowned.

The coach left the hall. Hornet felt his moment had come. He closed in on Antonio and pushed him violently with his shoulder so

that Antonio, stiff with surprise, almost stumbled when he lost the rhythm of his pace.

Jan Zeli entered the hall again. The door slammed and Hornet ran quickly back to his position. Antonio's heart hammered. The thumping of their bare feet resounded in the hall.

"Hornet! You look like a car mechanic!" jeered one of the boys in white.

Hornet was running in a marine-blue kimono unlike any other kimono in the hall. The blue cloth highlighted his fiery hair and even more his orange judo belt.

'I will not survive this. I have again fallen into Hornet's nest, moreover for the second time. What would Zok do? Zok would go home!' Antonio was racked by fear from the Kombol gang. 'What is happening to me?' he asked himself as he sweated running on. He didn't believe his eyes. 'And what NOW?' he wondered in panic.

"Now run backwards!" shouted Zeli and clapped his hands.

The judoka circle turned and started running backwards. As he ran, Antonio was watching Nikola's broad back. The pudgy Nikola was more and more out of step. They all had an unpleasant feeling that they didn't see where they were stepping as they ran backwards. Especially Nikola.

"OUCH!!!!!" A thousand hammers struck Antonio's big toe.

"Ow... sorry!" shouted Nikola panting. He didn't even turn after he had trodden on Antonio's toe with his heel. But even the severe pain was now a minor problem. Wheezing with pain, Antonio hopped on.

Jan Zeli sat on the bench and wrote something in his notebook. The coach's big black eyebrows drew together in the middle of his forehead. The regular and rhythmic sound of running steps could be

heard. Antonio still ran backwards limping as best he could. Quiet and nimble like an Indian, Hornet sneaked out of the circle. He squatted while feet stomped next to him. He waited for Antonio's limping steps. Crouching on all fours like a table he slipped behind his back.

With a sound as if all the mats were breaking Antonio suddenly crashed over Hornet. He slammed with his back on the floor like an overturned bug. The boys roared with laughter.

Jan Zeli looked up from his notebook. With a happy smile on his face Hornet was already running backwards with the others. The hall resounded with cheerful boyish laughter. Antonio got up hastily. He continued to run backwards painfully, anticipating new danger.

Zeli stood up frowning. The laughter died away immediately, and the coach remained standing with his arms crossed on his chest above his black belt. The scene he had witnessed was an old, harmless male welcome, afforded to newcomers. Everybody had to pass that baptism.

"Okay! Let's limber up! Find yourselves some room!"

The judokas jumped all over the hall looking like scattered beads of a string which could hardly be picked up again. Somebody approached behind Antonio's back and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Sorry", said the panting Hornet when Antonio turned around and moved the sweaty bangs away from his eyes. That was totally unexpected.

With an innocent smile on his freckled face, Hornet did not hesitate even a second but offered Antonio his hand. Antonio was amazed and didn't know what to do. Nevertheless, he relaxed and offered a forgiving hand to Hornet. Hornet suddenly and violently

pulled the sleeve of Antonio's kimono, grabbed his shoulder and threw him in a split second. It looked as if Antonio had slipped on a banana peel.

Everybody could hear the heavy fall. Antonio grimaced. His backside was numb. At first he didn't even know what had happened to him. The hall shook with a loud applause of all the judokas and even some cheering whistles. Judokas with belts of all colours, even Danijel and Ivan, laughed uproariously but also gave Antonio a big hand.

"Welcome to *Sakura*." Danijel, the eldest judoka, grabbed Antonio's hand, pulled him up and gave him a friendly tap on his shoulder.

He was admitted to the club. Antonio barely managed to stand up. His rump still hurt because of the painful fall. The others still applauded. He turned and looked hard at Hornet. He was hot and began to blush.

"You! Rookie!" coach Zeli called him. "Come here!" Jan Zeli waited for him with his hands on his hips. Red as a lobster, Antonio dragged himself to the coach. Antonio stood in the coach's shadow as Zeli leaned over him and untied his tangled belt.

"Look, you must watch how you tie yourself... See here... You wrap your belt twice around your waist, you pull it through and tie in a knot. The knot must not move to your back... It hurts if you fall on it", stressed Zeli. He checked whether Antonio had tightened the belt properly. The ends of the white judo belt were finally short. Antonio felt like a package tied up tightly with a string.

"Now you are a real judoka!" said Zeli and tapped him on the shoulder. "What's your name?" asked the tall good-natured coach.

"Antonio...", answered the boy downcast.

"Judoka Antonio, welcome", said the coach gently and bowed with the upper part of his big body. Antonio returned the bow hurriedly. He liked the way the grey-streaked coach had welcomed him.

Only the Kombol boy bothered him. 'I'm stupid as a hundred idiots... Stupid as ten thousand idiots', thought Antonio amidst the noise. He still held his painful buttocks with his hand. 'How will I get out of here alive?' he asked himself.

"LET'S GO!" Everybody heard Zeli. The coach waved to the boys and his face clearly showed that the time for old judo tricks was over. After the coach's order all the shouting, stomping, cries, quarrels, crashes, laughter, howling died out and stopped.

They silently bent, rotated their hips, knees, joints. They practiced gruelling push-ups and touched the green mats with their noses.

'That rat always needs the same lesson', thought the sullen Hornet clenching his teeth. 'And you'll really get it here, rat!' vowed Hornet. Threat flashed out of his eyes.

'Really, what NOW?' wondered Antonio when he saw the expression of Hornet's eyes. While he did his push-ups, he tried hard to come up with something. 'As regards mom and dad, things are clear... There is simply no return to the old flat... and to the old district... and that means... I will have to survive in Utrine with the Kombol gang... the best I can', concluded Antonio.

And collapsed on the floor like a dead dog after the tenth push-up. And the training session had just begun.

"The white belts will practice breakfalls in that ring! Forward, side and back breakfalls! The other judokas will do *kesa gatame*, the side control hold, in this ring. The green and the blue belts will do leg throws..." Coach Zeli deployed them throughout the hall.

Antonio looked at the hard and thin olive green mats arranged into two large square judo rings. The mats were cold but nobody seemed to mind like Antonio unused to go barefoot.

Hornet kept warning him with his looks from all angles. His presence breathed like danger down Antonio's neck. The blue kimono caught the eye.

"Come on, it's your turn!" Kiki pulled Antonio in front of the mat.

Thump! Antonio tried the forward breakfall from a squat. That was boring. It was like rolling on the mats at school during the physical education class. He didn't have to enrol in the judo class for that.

Thump! Thump! You could hear hollow thuds on the mats where the judo beginners were practicing.

Nearby, the red-haired member of the Kombol gang kept smiling ominously.

Antonio dropped to his knees and tried a forward breakfall. It was just like throwing oneself on bed... but... nevertheless... on a much harder bed, as Antonio felt as he tried the forward breakfall for the fifth time. He threw himself on the mat, but his hands were not stiff enough and he crashed with his whole body and the tip of his nose. He struck the hard mat because a moment ago he had tried to see where Hornet was.

THUMP! The mat reverberated under Nikola.

"You'll break through the *tatami*, fatso!" mocked him tiny Kiki.

"Grunt! Grunt!" Tall Tomislav also mocked him and grunted. Confused, Nikola pulled up the kimono pants stuck up his bum. Apparently he was used to being mocked because of his thickness.

The hall shook under them as if an earthquake had hit them. The paired older judokas started to throw one another on the mats.

SLAM! CRASH! SLAM! CRASH! Ten experienced and tough judokas, wearing blue and green belts, were in action. CRASH! Whoever didn't train judo would break his neck if he tried to do something like that. Antonio watched them and listened to them in disbelief.

'THIS IS THE REAL THING! This is the only way to survive in New Zagreb!' Antonio was warming to the idea. He stood stiff and watched them admiringly. He couldn't help speaking up: "How do they do it?" he asked spellbound.

"By training one hundred years", quickly replied skinny Kiki and shrugged. They both smiled.

Whaaaaam!!! The sound rang in the hall as if two stone walls had fallen on it. Antonio bent and gave a start as if afraid that something would fall on his head. After that terrific impact, the echo bounced from the mat against the walls and struck him like an arrow. Antonio thought that the boy thrown on the mat must have broken in half. But Ivan quickly stood up on the mat. He and Danijel again gripped their faded white kimonos and...

Whaaaaam!!! After the sound of another throw the walls appeared to come tumbling down.

"*Hajime!*" shouted Zeli again the Japanese word for "begin". It sounded like *djime*.

'How can they fall so violently on the hard mat without feeling any pain', kept wondering Antonio.

The coach paced by the ring. He watched the fierce fight of Ivan and Danijel on the tatami. They entangled their arms and legs, pulled each other's kimonos and stopped fighting at the coach's signal. And then they started again. Zeli looked like a tall Japanese as he kept shouting commands at the older judokas.

"*Hajime*", he shouted sharply again. Following every fight closely Zeli shouted commands again and again.

The sound of judo was now louder than that of the ugly weather behind the windows of the hall. "Danijel and Ivan are the best members of the club. They have each won twenty medals!" exclaimed Kiki. "And that is my brother. The one by the boy in the blue kimono. Can you see him?" Kiki proudly pointed at his elder brother Mario. Antonio followed his finger and saw Mario... and the grinning Hornet next to him.

"And what are you looking at?" asked Zeli as he sneaked up behind their backs. The boys with the white belt tightened their belts and white kimonos and stood at attention like soldiers.

"You will never learn about judo this way! I know, boys, that it's more interesting to look at the boys over there, but here you must first learn how to fall!" The experienced grey-streaked Zeli gave them a piece of his mind. "Come on, you will never get hurt even if you are thrown by somebody much stronger than you are." The coach backed two long steps.

"Krešo, Neven!" shouted Zeli and clapped his hands twice. Krešo quickly executed a forward breakfall. First Neven and then tall Tomo followed him. Antonio's fall on the mat could hardly be heard.

"Not bad, but look a little how judoka Kiki does it!" Zeli tapped him on his shoulder. Antonio nodded without a word and obediently ran back into the line.

Nikola widened his small black eyes, otherwise hidden by his thick cheeks.

Wham! Nikola's fall sounded much louder.

"Well done, Nikola!" remarked Zeli obviously pleased. Pudgy Nikola could at least be heard well. The coach tapped him on his shoulder as he slowly rose from the mat. Nikola's proud expression showed that he was also pleased with himself.

"Come on, boys! JUDO IS NOT HARMLESS! Here you can also be thrown...", cried out Zeli and made the beginners repeat their breakfalls time and again. During a break in his fight Hornet was watching them and sneered from the adjoining ring.

Antonio continuously rushed even faster than the others to join the line in front of the mat. They tried hard to make their falls sound properly, but everything showed that they were novices, that they were not prepared for strong impacts and that they did not even wear their kimonos properly. Only Zeli persistently believed that he could create judokas out of them.

"Not like that!"

Zeli stopped the line and told Antonio to repeat the forward breakfall. "Not like that! Land firmly on your forearms!" Zeli corrected Antonio again and made him repeat the breakfall.

"Very good", nodded Zeli.

'I finally made it', Antonio sighed with relief. For the first time during the training session his heart beat happily with pleasure. That little success helped him to feel more confident. He hopped lustily because the pace of the practice became faster. After him, Tomo,

Krešo and Neven did the forward breakfall. They did it very well. Nikola was doing it better and better. Kiki was the best. Antonio landed with firmly outstretched forearms and a taut body on the mat. Finally they all pushed away as if they were diving into water and falling on a dry bottom. Their bones shook. Their shoulders thudded. Their heads jolted. They fell on the mats in a variety of ways at least thirty times. And continued to rush back into the line.

"Okay! Take a break!" told Zeli the white belts having seen how they looked.

They all fell and lay down on the mats. Sweat ran under Antonio's long hair. He moved his wet bangs from his eyes and parted them on his forehead. Next to him Nikola was lying on his stomach as in a bed. He stretched out as a big bear. He almost fell asleep on the mat resting on his ruddy plump cheek. With his eyes closed Nikola looked as if he was going to sleep there till the next morning. Antonio smiled to the sleepy bear and tapped him kindly on the shoulder. Nikola opened one eye and looked at him with a friendly but tired smile.

Krešo looked at them panting with fatigue. Neven wiped the sweat from his forehead. Long-legged Tomo stretched his tired limbs. Among them he looked like a basketball player in a kimono.

"Coach!" Kiki suddenly cried out and jumped up. They all shuddered. Kiki hopped and pointed at his brother Mario. He was very upset and called Zeli to help him.

Mario was crushed under Hornet. His weak voice could barely be heard. He helplessly wiggled on the mat. He was trying to pull out from under the judoka in the blue kimono. Flailing his legs he looked like a bug on its back. He cried for help. His voice appeared to come from a sack. He slapped his palm on the mat showing that

he wanted to surrender but it didn't help. He choked, gripped and squeezed by the elbow round his neck.

"You are cutting capers again! No choking!" With the greatest ease coach Zeli grabbed the back of Hornet's kimono and tore him violently away from Mario. "You should have done the modified scarf hold, *kuzure gatame! Ku-zu-re ke-sa ga-ta-me!*" Zeli yelled at the panting Hornet. All the judokas watched Zeli scolding Hornet. The coach gave Hornet a fillip behind his ear. Hornet buried his head in his shoulders and cringed like a shame-faced mouse.

"And what have you done? You are not listening! We have done this twenty times. Why did you choke him?" continued Zeli sternly leaning over him.

Antonio watched with pleasure the wonder in front of his eyes. Red-haired Hornet flushed with embarrassment. The worried look on Kiki's face disappeared when his brother stood up. Pale in his face, Mario held his neck and coughed. But he was all right.

"*Hajime!*" sharply commanded Zeli again in Japanese. The heavy silence was broken.

"Steer clear of that one in a blue kimono!" said angry Kiki and looked meaningfully at Antonio. A strange yellow tuft stuck out from Kiki's brown hair at the top of his head. He looked like a parrot.

"Steer clear! No kidding", said Kiki even more firmly and looked again at Antonio. "They don't call him Hornet without reason. He's really venomous like a thousand wasps", continued Kiki.

"It aches like a thousand stings when he throws you", added Neven seriously. With his jutting front teeth he looked like a beaver.

Krešo also looked serious. With that large mole on his face he looked as if smudged with chocolate.

"Steer clear of him", repeated tall Tomo as well. Nikola also nodded with his cheeks trembling. The boys with the white belts were not kidding.

"I know well what he is like", answered Antonio. 'It's easy for you to tell me to steer clear of him, but how. Wherever I go, he lies in ambush', thought Antonio as he sat again on the mats with the boys. Nikola smiled and lay next to him as if he wanted to continue his interrupted sound sleep.

WHAAAM! The sound of a loud crash marked another incredible and violent judo throw.

"I'll learn that!" loudly swore Antonio in front of all the white belt judokas.

"So will I...", uttered the chubby Nikola and looked at them with his eyes half closed. He had stood up on his sluggish legs to see the throw.

"What's up, boys? You're not tired already, are you?" said Zeli to the diligent older judokas and laughed. After their fierce fight they also lay down on the floor, or sat, their kimonos undone, catching their breath.

"Petar! Luka! Ivan! Danijel! Denis! They will go to Maribor", exclaimed Zeli with satisfaction. Still lying down the boys whose names were called smiled proudly and serenely.

"I have not made any decision about the other candidates!" seriously continued Zeli and looked pointedly at Mario and Hornet. They stood up right away. Their faces reflected their faint hope that they would get another chance.

"Well done, boys", said Zeli gently, clapped his hands and brought the training session to an end at about seven p.m.

The hue and cry in the stifling locker room resembled the din before they started their training session. Antonio sat on the yellow bench. His legs stretched on their own with fatigue. He liked judo, but he also found it very strenuous. But he got a grip on himself because he wanted to avoid the Kombol boy on the way home. He dressed as fast as he could. Rain was still pouring on the windows of the locker room.

Denis was dressing next to him. The kid was just a second grader. He was yellow all over: his hair, his eyebrows and his eyelashes were all yellowish. He smiled, happy because he was going to Maribor. Denis untied his yellow belt and curled it into a yellow spiral, and then put it tidily into his bag.

Antonio envied him and all the others because they had no problems as he did. They were changing slowly, prattling and joking as if they didn't feel like going home. But some looked as if they couldn't dress because of fatigue. Nikola was wet as if splashed with water. He had taken off his kimono exposing flabby layers of his stomach.

Antonio put on his jeans and red army boots. In his hurry he crushed the big toe of the still barefoot Nikola. The boy cried woefully.

"Ow, I'm sorry", exclaimed Antonio immediately. Krešo, Kiki, Neven and Tomo could not help laughing. Sparks flew before Nikola's eyes and he sucked air with a hissing sound as if he were inhaling it through a straw. It really hurt a lot.

"Now you have seen, fatso, what it's like when you step on somebody's foot!" remarked Tomo loudly.

"I didn't do it on purpose, Nikola", repeated Antonio and looked helplessly at his boots.

The older judokas entered the locker room. Judoka Ivan, swarthy and sullen, strong as a horse, didn't look at anybody. After him came Danijel. He was tall and he really looked like a grown-up athlete. He entered the locker room without the upper part of his kimono displaying his washboard abs.

"It's *Hohrrrnet's* fault!" complained Mario loudly to the tired Petar. They were all steaming with sweat and the locker room got unbearably hot. The locker room door slammed loudly again.

Turned to the wall, Antonio chucked his kimono into his sports bag. He grabbed his jersey from the hanger, turned, pulled it over his head and spotted Hornet close to him. They both stood still because of that close eye-to-eye encounter.

Hornet grinned and bristled. Antonio also looked like a cockerel spoiling for a fight.

"I am not going to *Mahrrribor* only because of him!" someone shouted from the other end of the locker room.

Hornet looked up threateningly and rushed across the locker room. He and Mario quarrelled loudly and scuffled. They fell on the floor. There was shouting. Grappling.

Antonio put on his yellow winter jacket over a warm striped red-blue t-shirt. He would manage to get away from here as quickly as possible. Leaving the school he put on his black woollen cap and rushed through Ribnjak park with the umbrella in his hand.

It was already dark outside. He waited for tram No. 6 on the main town square. But it was nowhere in sight for a long time. Tram traffic was delayed because of the downpour. The crowd on the tram station grew. No. 6 arrived. Uh-hu! Finally. They stormed the door and so did Antonio. He was lucky to get a vacant seat. He was exhausted after two hours of jumping and, especially, falling and he eagerly sank on the seat. He took off his cap. His long hair was still moist and stuck together with sweat. He leaned his forehead on the cold window and watched the rain. Everything during his judo training session had pleased him - except the boy from the Kombol gang. He had never felt so manly anywhere else.

Nothing could be seen through the misted window, and Antonio listened to the thunder. Boom!

The tram was swaying. He pulled the book, *Basic Judo*, from his sports bag. It was full of good photographs. He had bought it with his dad when he enrolled in the Sakura Judo Club.

Boooooooooom...

Outside sounds slowly faded for Antonio. A kind of magic kept him glued to the pages he was turning. Lightning lit up the sentences.

The young Japanese Jigoro Kano had just turned eleven when his family moved to Tokyo. He arrived in the big city from the small village of Mikage near Kobe. The tiny kid wanted to become strong in any possible way. In Tokyo he heard about a martial art with which even a person not particularly strong could defeat a much stronger opponent.

Kano did not hesitate. He was fed up with the intimidation of stronger boys. They picked quarrels with him only to beat him up, and he decided to learn how to defend himself. Because of his great

desire to become strong, Kano mastered a Japanese martial art called jiu jitsu. However, it involved rough and dangerous throwing techniques, and arm and leg bending. At the time it was said in Japan that this martial art was turning boys into bullies.

Kano was thinking about it, too. When he grew up, when he was twenty-two, he devised a new martial art and called it judo. He also founded his own martial art school, Kodokan. Kano's judo school still exists in Japan. He wanted to show to everybody that judo was something new. Kano also demonstrated that judo was not dangerous and that people practicing judo took care not to hurt the opponent. Kano...

BOOOOOM!

The loud thunder startled Antonio and he stopped reading. And then he was startled even more when he saw the Hornet's blue sports bag with a white inscription, *Sakura Judo Club*. It was lying on the floor near his boots.

Hornet was standing next to his seat, grinning and gripping a handhold, with the Dinamo cap on his head. Antonio turned and looked through the window. It was dark outside and only the Hornet's ugly reflection could be seen on the glass. The Kombol boy still stayed close.

The tram sped on in darkness through the rain. The rain drops were getting bigger and bigger, drumming and splashing on the window. A lightning flashed again. The tram stopped swaying as it approached a stop. They finally reached the last stop and the tram door opened. They got off. Antonio first, Hornet after him. It did not rain heavily any more, just a drizzle, and umbrellas were clicking as they closed. Antonio sped on listening anxiously to steps of the Kombol boy behind him. He shuddered as the cold wind carried

everything along the street: waste, leaves, paper. It looked as if the wind were sweeping the city.

'And what NOW? Anything can happen just now', trembled Antonio. The empty street stretched before him. The wind scattered the rainy clouds and blew ever so strongly in his back. He could clearly hear Hornet's steps behind him. Hornet followed him scraping deliberately with his shoes. The crowns of the trees in the Travno district flailed in the wind but Antonio was still unable to get rid of Hornet as he reached this, the most dangerous part of the street.

Antonio ran home followed by Hornet. He rushed wildly past the Mammoth, Hornet's home, but the Kombol boy kept running after him. Antonio did not turn around. He recognized the sound of Hornet's shoes. He hurried on, and the shoes behind him ran faster and faster. As he ran down Kombol Street he had half a mind to throw down his bag. Fear followed him closely. When he got to the glass door at 85A he closed it quickly behind him. He had made it! He turned with a sigh of relief.

Still panting he gazed through the glass door into the darkness broken only by street lights. But Hornet was nowhere in sight. Where did he disappear? Antonio could not or did not want to believe his eyes. Actually, the wind had been pushing a piece of cardboard behind him all the time. It was still scraping along the street as the wind carried it away.

Antonio felt like an idiot as he climbed the stairs. How could he imagine that Hornet was chasing him?

"Well, how did you get on?" welcomed him dad laughing as he opened the door. His face clearly expressed great interest in his

son's judo experience. Antonio's mom also peered curiously out of the kitchen followed by the smell of pancakes.

"I got on fine...", said Antonio pretending cheer. He was hungry. After dinner he went to his room and closed the door, barely managed to change into his pyjamas and collapsed like a tired dog. His muscles ached. What a day...