

JERKER VIRDBORG

SUMMER, SISTER

Translated from the Swedish by Michael Gallagher

FIRST

Once he'd reversed in and turned off the engine, the bald guy pulled the creaking barn doors to behind him. I was waiting with our rucksacks, standing by the workbench that was littered with empty and splintered fodder racks as the sun's sharp rays pushed through the cracks in the timber walls. I wondered what fuel the truck ran on, but the notion that Anna might have asked seemed inconceivable. Inside the cab, the other guy sat staring at us, on full alert, with his rifle lying across his lap.

Anna and the bald one walked over to the doors and peered out through the small gap between them. They stayed standing there for several seconds as the swirling dust gradually settled onto the truck's well worn dark blue tyres. He spat onto the floor and glanced over at me. His movements were a little awkward; his eyes looked almost luminous. I thought to myself that he must be high. He was staring at Anna's back, and his fingers were resting on the pistol that hung from his belt. He whipped off a tarpaulin and then lifted several green wooden boxes down from the bed of the truck. He opened them one by one, with great care, right there by the drains, in the middle of the filthy concrete floor.

Before long, all the lids were open. The sun caught the black barrels and grips inside, making them appear shiny, yet still matt, as though they were made of silk.

"How did you hear about us?" he asked, clearly tense.

Anna explained: From Hans.

From their short exchange, I worked out that the man was known as Saxon. He was heavily built, unshaven, his hands were covered with cuts and tattoos, and his eyes were constantly darting around. He nodded along to her explanation of how she knew Hans, and as he pointed at the weapons, it looked to me like he was showing off.

“This is what I’ve got in at the moment.” He said, and exchanged a glance with the other one, who was still sitting in the cab.

Anna crouched down to have a closer look; I just stood there, motionless. All of the weapons looked pretty much the same to me, but Anna soon started asking questions about a particular rifle that was lying in its own case, inside one of the larger crates.

“The bipod’s in there. So is the scope. The strap’s missing though.”

They continued their discussions, quietly. He told her he had at least fifty boxes of ammo for that particular rifle, if we really were interested.

“Ukal,” he said, and Anna nodded.

I didn’t know what ukal meant. And I couldn’t tell whether he thought that Anna knew either. But how would he know?

“There are much lighter weapons,” he said, and I noticed him peer over at me and then at Anna’s own slight frame.

“I know,” she said as she picked up the rifle.

She put the butt to her shoulder and took aim, towards one of the ceiling joists.

“Nothing quite as good though.” I looked at the spot she was aiming at, a large hole where several planks were broken and the roof tiles had long since fallen in. I could see rows of swallows’ nests and grey-white piles of pigeon droppings.

And I kept staring at her, as she carried on taking aim with one eye closed. The even lines around her mouth, the tired but quite determined look in her eyes, her little button nose.

The bald man seemed to be stressed, yet was doing his best to give the impression of being calm. I thought about what those two could do to us here, in this barn. About what they would surely like to do to her.

I did know that as soon as you mentioned the name Hans, people were that little bit more respectful. They set about discussing the price.

“Have this one instead,” he said and pointed clumsily towards a slender rifle lying in an even larger crate.

Anna cleared her throat.

“You came down here and you’re helping us, despite very short notice, and I’m genuinely grateful for that,” she replied.

“But I’ll do the choosing myself.”

The bald man looked at her carefully.

She put the first gun back in its case, which she then lifted out of the crate. I was just able to make out that there was writing on the lid, something in jagged white letters: PSG 90.

Then she made her way over to one of the other crates and picked out two black handguns, two holsters, extra clips and a number of cases of ammunition. He lit a cigarette and placed the four weapons onto the ground, alongside lots of other stuff, various accessories I believe, and the ammo of course, and a box of hand grenades.

“How much for the lot?” Anna asked.

She pulled out her knotted handkerchief and showed him some of what she had. The various metals glittered as they caught the light. They mentioned a price, Anna went lower. He went along with that, no complaints.

They agreed a deal. Throughout the process, I noticed him scrutinising her, and me, even more closely.

“Quite a lot of stuff?” he said.

There was something different about his expression now, something I hadn’t seen at first. Something a bit more cautious, in his otherwise careworn demeanour. I also saw how he looked over at the other guy over in the truck – as his right hand hovered around the belt inside the military tunic and he gently wiped his left hand across his bald head.

Anna didn’t respond to the question, instead examining the state of the weapons once more, then weighing both handguns in her hand.

“Are you selling them on?” he said.

Again, Anna said nothing. But she did feel his inquisitive stare, I could see that. A few moments passed.

Eventually she said:

“We can’t stay here with Hans anymore. We’re not going to sell them. They’re for us.”

“You need them? Because... you’re leaving?”

Anna met his stare and nodded almost imperceptibly.

The man swatted at a fly that was persistently buzzing around him. The roof joists creaked as a gust of wind surged right through the barn. He glanced over at the other guy in the car again, and throughout I was thinking about how I’d make a run for the doors if it came to that. But the man walked over to the wall, bent down quickly and then approached Anna. He was holding a large plant. He presented it ceremoniously, like a bouquet.

A stinging nettle.

“Good luck,” he said.

I could see the other one smirking from inside the truck.

Anna ignored the nettle, and backed away slightly. She looked prepared, but frightened; she cleared her throat and was about to say something. He got there first:

“Where are you going to go?”

His voice was calm, but his placid delivery masked an unmistakable aggression. The broad smile on his face revealed a set of small, brown teeth.

“We just need to get out of here,” she replied, “and...”

“You do realise, don’t you?” he cut her off. “That I can’t risk weapons ending up any old place, not the way things are right now. What happens if you get shot, or taken prisoner? The weapons might get traced. And then it’ll be me they’re after.”

I looked quizzically at Anna, because what he said didn't seem to me to be particularly credible. I got the feeling he just wanted to mess her about. Or else he wanted to show that he had the upper hand.

Anna was silent again, and after several seconds, when she still hadn't answered, it was as though his patience finally ran out.

"Suit yourself. Fuck it," he said and gathered the weapons up once more, started closing the lid of each crate with a short, sharp slam.

"Forget it."

Anna walked over and tried to stop him.

"But we need them!"

He brushed her off, by now the impatience and rage were lighting up his eyes. He's going to do it now, I thought to myself. He's going to jump her; he's going to floor her.

But he didn't.

"Where are you going to go?" he repeated instead, clearly enunciated and unexpectedly loudly.

Anna looked intently at the dusty floor, staring down at the hay, dirt and the trampled nettle that now filled the space which moments earlier had seen the weapons neatly arranged in size-order.

"I don't know," she said, more quickly this time. "Away."

He laughed, and his wheezy voice made it sound as though he needed to cough, but there was no such reflex, and no other sounds.

Then he went back over to the truck bed and started lifting the crates on to it.

"We can give you more jewellery," Anna said.

"Are you completely thick? That's not the point."

He was obviously enjoying the whole situation. And I was still waiting for the two of them to take things one step further. Waiting for them to rip her clothes off.

He carried on loading the truck. Anna looked ready to hit him. Suddenly though, he stopped himself, right in the middle of a jerky movement, as though he'd had a seizure, perhaps some kind of absent-minded generosity.

“Okay, well if we put it this way then – I’m just really bloody curious – which direction are you heading?”

Anna looked confused. He smacked his lips and his eyes narrowed, perhaps because some thought had just occurred to him.

“Does it really matter?” she said.

“Yes, it’s critically important actually. Are you heading east?”

She didn’t answer, and I recalled what she’d said to me that morning: We must not tell *anyone* what we’re planning to do.

The silence continued.

Eventually, Anna made eye contact with him again, with not so much as a hint of an expression, and no words.

He decoded the silence. And her stubborn gaze made him think that he’d guessed right.

“East?” he said, still without having had any confirmation from Anna. “It’s never going to work, you do realise that don’t you? Are you going far?”

He smiled, lit another cigarette and I saw that it was one of those that tastes really odd. I thought about the fact that of course I had no idea of what lay to the east, and about whether Anna might just be trying

to get him to think that we were heading that way, or whether that was where we were actually heading.

“You won’t even survive the first few kilometres. How are you going to get through their lines?”

Anna didn’t reply, and checked the grassy bank outside the barn yet again. I understood why she was being so attentive. The truck’s engine might’ve been heard from a long way off. The Sun’s rays pushed their way into her light brown hair, which was up in a bun and secured with a chrome clip, and, seen in silhouette, her lanky figure seemed simultaneously very thin and very strong.

But it was as though she hadn’t heard what he’d said.

“How many of you are there anyway?” he said with a suspicious, almost mocking smile. Anna turned around slowly and looked straight at me, a look that I really struggled to interpret.

“There’s the two of us. Me and Erik here, my brother.”

He sniggered, blew out smoke, and laughed.

“Just the two of you?”

Anna said yes and looked at me again, with a look that someone else, long ago, might have been able to consider a little smile. I knew, of course, that there was no way this was a smile.

He started looking at us differently now, and he crumpled his nose as he composed himself:

“Okay.”

It seemed like he needed to go over the whole thing several times in his head.

“Okay.” He said again, and tapped the ash from his cigarette. “You know, thinking about it... I think maybe we can go through with this anyway. But not a word to anyone about Saxen, you got that?”

Anna nodded.

He started unloading the crates from the truck bed again and soon he'd picked out all the equipment and accessories that Anna had chosen earlier. His tone of voice and his body language changed once more as he carried on talking – now he was almost too friendly – and there was no longer any sign of him being high.

“If you're serious about making a break for it, all on your own, let me give you some good advice.”

“We don't need any advice,” Anna fired back instantly.

He gave her a faintly amused look and pretended not to have heard that.

“Number one: Be suspicious of everyone. Everyone.”

In the meantime, Anna was staring at me with her jaws tightly clenched and without blinking, as if to say: Does he think we're complete fucking idiots?

Unperturbed, he continued dispensing his advice. He had nine top tips, he said, ones that had saved him and *his* brother many times. I tried not to listen, but I couldn't help it.

“Two: Only move around at night. Three: Avoid any main roads. Four: Avoid larger towns. Five: Avoid small towns. Six: Water is more important than food. Seven: Never be the last to draw your weapon. Eight: Even if you're out of ammo, always behave as if you've got plenty. And nine: Be suspicious. Of everyone. *Everyone.*”

Once he'd finished, Anna just stood there in silence. I thought to myself that that was only eight tips, not nine.

“Just you and your brother eh?” he said. “With a handgun and a rifle each?”

Anna took a few paces across the floor and folded her arms across her chest.

“He doesn't know much about guns. He's too young. I'll just have to teach him...”

She interrupted herself.

“Oh yeah, here you go.”

She handed him the gold chains and the platinum rings. He took another close look at the jewellery, strained to read the tiny stamps but then, “Ah, fuck it,” before stuffing the lot into the inside pocket of his coat.

He straightened his back and looked straight at me, a long, inquisitive stare, and now the aggression in his voice had returned.

“Young, you say? He doesn't look it.”

Anna looked at me again with that strange expression, and this time I thought she looked embarrassed about something: about the whole situation, about herself, yet she was still doing her best to protect me when she said:

“Not young like that.”

The arms deal and the brothers in the barn – it all started that morning.

You'll have to bear with me, my telling you things in the wrong order. Everything happened so fast that day.

I want to point out that I am writing all of it down as best I possibly can. This all needs to be described clearly; it needs to be “just right.” Anna's often told me that I could be a scout or a lookout; that I register an unusual amount of detail.

At the same time, it's perfectly obvious that I could never be a scout, or be like her.

Sure, I can see. But that's about it.

Well, I'm good with words too. That might be what makes me seem older, seem different to what I'm really like.

Anyway, I am going to write all of this down as well as I possibly can. Despite this I might not manage to tie it all together in a logical way, I'm probably not going to remember every detail correctly.

Actually that last bit is wrong. I remember details, all of them. Even though a lot of this was weeks ago, I remember everything vividly.

Sometimes you have to tell a story in the wrong order just to be able to tell it at all.

1

THE MARCH

That morning I was standing in the kitchen of 'R', one of the chalets where lots of the kids spent time. R was quite big, and was set a long way back from the main road. I used to help out down there, not every day, but almost. I say help out – I used to keep an eye on the younger ones, as best I could. Sometimes, though, it felt as though the rest of the staff looked at me as another kid.

It was just an ordinary morning, if anything can be considered ordinary nowadays. I was just starting to get used to the routines, despite the lookout-soldiers being positioned close by – they weren't so close that the youngest children had to see them. Not all the kids were at the table; many of them were lying on the floor, playing quietly with pinecones and cuddly toys. The rain was getting in. The cardboard had blown away from the windows but it was really only drizzling, and besides, the fusty smell was less noticeable than before. A girl named Diana lit a fire in the cast iron stove and was busy warming the tins straight on the hotplate. We ate that old Army ravioli pretty much every day and the surplus heat that emanated from the chimney breast meant that for the last few weeks at least, the kids had been able to unbutton their winter clothes when they were in that room.

It was now well into the spring though. And there I was, standing in the kitchen in jeans and a vest, and Diana went off to the toilet with a few of the kids and all of those colourful postcards showing elephants on parade that someone had found in a shoebox in the basement of a burned-down school still adorned the walls in front of me in neatly

ordered rows – at least the damp hasn't got to the tape yet, I remember thinking.

Then I saw her. Anna, standing by the pear trees, right outside the kitchen window.

She had never come over to R before. She spent most of her time up on Ekeberget, the hill where many of the other houses stood, and where Hans and the other leaders would dole out postings or reconnaissance orders each morning and evening. She never used to tell me what they were up to. I do know though that she was often trusted to complete many of the tasks that were seen as being high risk. And given her background, that's not really surprising.

Now, with Anna standing outside R, I remember thinking that it had been ages, at least a month, since we'd had the chance to have a proper chat. After everything that had happened in March, in Fröde and Källered.

Word had got around, about Hans. That there were lots of us. And that we had plenty of M84s and machine guns, but above all: ammunition.

Now though, seeing Anna standing out there, I could tell straight away that something was up.

“Can you talk?” she said.

I glanced over towards the kids – they were reading or playing as before – and I asked one of the older ladies to watch the stove.

Then I went out into the garden. Anna came and stood right next to me.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” she whispered. “We can’t stay here anymore.”

I just stared at her.

What did she just say?

I looked over my shoulder, as if there might be someone standing there, listening.

“Right now,” she went on, before I’d had the chance to say anything. “Tell your colleagues that you’ve been replaced.”

There wasn’t really much to replace, and she knew it, she just said that so it wouldn’t seem like she was being nasty.

Then it was her turn to survey the woodland behind us, despite the fact that we had no reason whatsoever to suspect that there was anyone there.

“Why do we...?” I began.

She took a deep breath, as though she was getting ready to persuade me.

Her expression, though, said something else entirely. And when she pulls that face, she never gives me a chance. There’s never any room for questions either.

“He’s given us till tonight,” she said. “You and your brother need to disappear immediately.” That’s what he said. Otherwise one of us is going to shoot you.”

I kept staring at her. It was hard to take it all in, and, at that point, hard for me to imagine what the consequences might be.

“You do realise what I’m telling you, don’t you Erik? We have to leave the camp, straight away. Can you pack whatever clothes you have,

and boots, then make your way over to the portakabins, try and get hold of a tarpaulin and a quilt or maybe a sleeping bag, a rucksack and whatever else you might need? But make sure *no one* sees you, that no one suspects anything. You need to do this on your own, okay?”

Now I could only hear the sound of her breathing – scared, determined – and a nearby rustling as purposeful fieldfares hopped through scattered piles of last year’s leaves.

She made me repeat the list of items back to her; I managed it at the third attempt.

“Meet me by that funny tree near the western well, it’s a whitebeam,” she said. “I’ve got loads of stuff to get pack too, I need to get hold of some guy called Saxen, he’s going to help us with special equipment. Hans wouldn’t let me keep it all you see.”

Then silence, and I didn’t know what was going on.

But then at the same time I did know, I understood perfectly well, this was a single issue: We couldn’t stay with Hans anymore.

She took a few steps away from the chalet.

“But where... where are we going to go?” I managed.

She sighed, gulped, and flung her arms around herself for a moment, and it looked as though she was going to topple over.

She coughed, turned around, and started jogging off across the grass, in the direction of the paved road.

“By the whitebeam. Got that?”

I stood watching as she disappeared from the garden, then I headed back inside, as if in a trance, and I ended up against the wall, the thoughts in my head quickly and constantly being replaced by new ones.

It was completely unfathomable. We were leaving – why was that necessary, what does she mean, why?”

But, at the same time, it was all perfectly simple.

An order, from Hans. Those were non-negotiable.

Before long Diana was back, and in rather vague terms I explained to her and the other middle-aged woman that my replacement would be arriving shortly, that I'd been given other responsibilities for the next few days. They both looked puzzled.

“Are you leaving?” said one of the kids, a boy of about five.

I didn't know how to respond. Several of the children gathered around, which surprised me. It felt like they were waiting for something and eventually Diana explained that I wasn't going to be around for a few days but that I'd be back soon. That little boy grabbed my leg, upended a box full of marbles and started crying. I really couldn't understand why he'd become attached to me, and as he cried I pushed my fingers through his coarse, unwashed hair, then patted his back, did the same with the others, and tried hard not to think of anything in particular.

I peered out through the window, but I couldn't see anything other than the light blue sky, green leaves and blooming cowslips.

Before I left I turned to face the children, and felt really awkward because it was such an obvious lie.

“I’m sorry that I have to leave you. It’s only for a few days.”

I've got longish, fair hair and I cut it myself. Or hack it off. My irises are greyish green and my eyes are narrow. I'm one hundred and seventy eight centimetres tall, and what they call 'slightly built', with gently sloping shoulders. The stubble on my chin is patchy, and on my cheeks it's non-existent. I've got skinny arms and legs, and my head looks a bit too big for my body.

No one would ever have guessed that Anna and I were siblings. There are no similarities, apart from the fact that we're both skinny. She has high cheekbones and her large eyes give a real intensity to her stare. People used to turn around to look at her. No one would notice me.

She's so quick too – in her thoughts and her actions, while I've never even been able to walk at a steady pace. As mentioned, I'm good at describing things. Understanding things, on the other hand...

The differences between us have always been marked, and obvious to anyone.

There is one thing though that gives our relationship away. And we're the only ones who know about it.

It's the hands. If we lay our hands next to each other, it's as though we'd be able to swap them without any noticeable difference.

Thin, dextrous fingers, with slightly rounded cuticles.

A few months before we came to Hans, we'd spent a couple of nights in the basement of a commercial property in Hällevad. None of the shelter rooms were intact, so we had to hole up in there. The floor was strewn with chairs and empty boxes and was almost covered with mouldy flour – it had once housed a pizzeria.

Throughout those two nights of bombing, Anna had held both my hands tightly, for hours and hours at a time, without let-up. Our hands melded into each other. I spent so long staring at our intertwined fingers that eventually I couldn't really tell where hers ended and mine began.

Those nights in the pizzeria in Hällevad, I felt as if the boundary between us was gone.

I was focused and I worked efficiently, I'd gathered up everything I thought I might have a use for and piled it by my sleeping place up in the loft of 'L' chalet before walking straight through the whole chalet complex. After spending almost half an hour hiding from one of our assistance units down by the storage sheds I was able to kit myself out with gear pulled out of one of them. Lying in what appeared to be unsorted piles were huge stacks of dirty equipment, most of which seemed to have come from the army.

I managed to reach the neighbouring woodland without being seen – I assumed. I'd followed the contours of Ekeberget, along the rocks covered in thick moss and down to the hollow that both streams ran through. I was constantly looking over my shoulder but I didn't catch sight of anyone who seemed to have noticed me.

I checked my wristwatch as I came to the next summit and caught a glimpse of the well house's little pitched roof amongst the burnt-out foundations.

And there it was, standing alone with its strangely dense, unruly branches. The tree.

Anna was sitting on the ground behind the well's masonry base, looking around in all directions. As soon as I came near she got to her feet and picked up her green canvas bag without a word, and we headed north, straight into the birch forest.

After several minutes, at a specific spot next to a huge stone block, she stopped and turned around.

Through an opening between the trees the low slung wooden houses over on Ekeberget were just visible. Hans and the other leaders were holed up in there. Anna pulled out her binoculars and looked over towards them, then let me do the same.

The boarded-up windows, the damp-ravaged walls, the grey-flecked roof tiles. Yet more abandoned houses, just like all the others – that's what they looked like, if you didn't know what they were being used for.

“Why are you looking at them?” I asked.

Anna's stare met mine.

“Hans didn't have to do this. The easiest thing would've been to kill us straight away.”

She kept walking.

“He didn't though. He gave us a chance, a chance to escape.”

I was still none the wiser as to why we were studying the houses through the binoculars.

“I'm not a hundred per cent sure though,” she said.

It was a moment or two before I asked, “About what?”

After that there was another pause before she replied.

“About whether Tell or someone else might be able to...”

She cut herself off.

I didn't like the way she went quiet like that.

And she held her silence.

Tell, a man in his forties, had completely white hair. Strange rumours circulated about him, a former hunter and an officer in the army who hailed from Värmland, a western region that borders Norway. Hans would often turn to him to execute tasks that no one else could manage. Rumour had it that Tell had, a month or so earlier, lead a successful ambush against a column and then followed it up by forcing his captives to eat their own ammunition. That he was capable, if the need arose, of killing an opponent using only his left hand. Not only that, but he was better at predicting the weather than anyone else, which was considered an invaluable asset. Whenever I saw him at the camp I would always stare at the floor, because the look in his eyes was disconcertingly sharp, almost as though they were backlit.

Eventually she did break the silence.

“We'll talk about it later.”

We kept walking, quickly and without any conversation. I was very close to her, and all I could see was tree trunks and stones and roots. And throughout, newly-opened trembling leaves jostled gently in the canopy above us.

She stopped, close to a cairn where the path forked, and pushed a matted pile of dry leaves to one side. From the cavity beneath, she pulled out a half-full rucksack, a sleeping matt, two empty ammunition belts

and a cooking pot. It took her several careful minutes to transfer the contents of her canvas bag over to the rucksack, tie the rest to the frame and then pull all the nylon straps taut.

“I had to do several trips up here this morning, otherwise it would have looked suss,” she whispered. “I said I’d been given a special mission; I’d be away for a couple of days, that was the only way to fool the quartering officer.”

She checked the contents of my rucksack and praised my efforts – I’d managed to get hold of a helmet and a pair of boots that were both in reasonable condition and were the right size.

“Warm clothes?” she said.

“This is all I could find.”

She shook her head and stared towards the heavens. The rain, and the grey clouds, was gone.

“It’s getting warmer now. Almost mid-May now, isn’t it?” I said.

She didn’t respond, and packed more gear into my rucksack instead. She continued until it was incredibly full of stuff. I didn’t notice what all of it was, but I did see a folding spade, several packets of painkillers, soap, dehydrated food and water purification tablets.

She seemed nervous, she swore about something I couldn’t grasp and then she pointed out our onward route through the trees. My footsteps were heavy.

“Where are we going?” I said. “What is your plan?”

She stopped, and stared straight at me.

“What difference does it make if I explain it? You still don’t know anything, you won’t understand.”

I looked down at the ground and read the compass, because at least I was good at that, and thought about how warm the air was, how I wasn't cold at all.

"I was just wondering," I said, with my eyes fixed on the quivering needle.

Before long we were walking again, and I stuffed the compass into my pocket. We snuck across several clearings surrounded by decrepit round-pole fencing and the odd pile of moss-covered rocks. New birch copses took over, then mixed woodland with pines, fir trees and yet more birches.

"Trust me, I know where we're going," she said.

Her tone was a bit too assured, which made me suspicious because that's what she usually sounds like when she's lying. I did, however, realise that I couldn't ask any more questions, although I did want to.

We entered a larger woodland that contained only young birch trees. Their trunks were so alike, so close together, their bark so brilliant white, and the space between the trees was filled with tall, strong grass that was almost unnaturally green. The ground itself was uneven, and we both stumbled at various points, and the birches continued – there were loads of them.

"I've never been here before," I said.

"But I have," she replied.

The landscape opened up ahead of us and I caught sight of a long, grassy bank that might once have been grazing pasture. At the top of

one of the hills lay the remains of a burnt out farmhouse. Only the foundation and the chimneybreast were left standing.

It all looked deserted. Anna lifted the binoculars to her eyes and spent several seconds surveying the scene.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

We followed the line of a collapsed electric fence that marked the boundary where woodland gave way to pasture.

Eventually I saw it. Just to the right of the blackened shells was a lone building that hadn't burnt down.

A barn.

And there, crawling up the road just behind it, was a clapped-out blue lorry with a covered truck bed.

So I tend to recount things in the wrong order. I can't help it. It will all make sense in the end, I promise, it will all be present and correct, from start to finish.

So far, it feels like my eyes were working perfectly throughout, were constantly in a state of readiness, and I'm managing to use a pen to reproduce what I saw on the page.

Saxen and his brother, the arms deal – once we'd sealed it we stayed inside the barn for a little while. The sun's rays kept cutting through the slatted wall, and I heard the rumble of brakes outside, I spotted two huge spiders creeping across nets that spanned the unglazed window frames. Anna showed me how to rest the rifle barrel against my shoulder and then threaded one of the ammo belts between my legs. She attached the

pistol holster so that it hung loosely against my right hip. She left the rifle case on the floor, tied the sniper rifle and its bipod to her rucksack, inside the cover, before we grabbed the rest of the gear and slowly headed for the double doors.

Saxen promised not to start his engine until well after we were out of sight.

Just as we were leaving, he said:

“Don’t forget my tips. The nine top tips.”

“We won’t,” I replied.

Anna looked irritated but Saxen nodded calmly, apparently in my direction.

“Above all, number seven. Never be the last to draw your weapon.”

Anna and I crouched down as we half-jogged through the doors, out and towards the undergrowth to the north of the barn. The weight of the bags seemed incredibly heavy at first but once I’d adjusted the waist strap and we were in amongst the trees we were soon moving just as unencumbered as if we hadn’t been wearing anything at all. I scratched my face a few times on a few branches, I had to close my eyes mid-stride, we’d already covered several hundred metres but Anna kept on running. We changed direction and headed slightly more eastwards, before heading north again.

After ten minutes of travel we were still in dense forest, surrounded by Scots Pines. I was sweaty but not tired, I tweaked the shoulder straps and the one around my waist again and Anna pulled out a map, then showed me a point almost in the middle.

“Far enough away from the barn to make me feel a bit more relaxed,” she whispered. “This is where we are now, more or less.”

She then pulled out a tin can with no label and opened it impressively quickly with the smaller knife. It contained sweetcorn. She scooped some of it into her mouth with her fingers and then handed me the rest. It tasted a bit sour, but I ate all it all, then put the can to my lips and drank every last drop of the liquid.

“Erik, we’re going to have to have agreed rules, about what’s what,” she said afterwards. I looked at her intently, because I realised that whatever she was about to say was going to cause me difficulty.

“Rules that apply at *all* times,” she said.

Eventually I nodded.

“If we get separated, what do we do then?”

I gave it some thought as we took turns to drink from her canteen.

“The usual, we meet back at the last place we were together,” she said.

“If possible. If for some reason it isn’t, then we meet back up wherever we slept.”

“And if that’s not possible...” I began

“...then we meet back at the place where we spent the night before last.”

I thought that that wasn’t enough. Surely there were other conceivable scenarios, and we didn’t have any rules for them. I didn’t say anything though, because it seemed like an awkward way of looking at things.

She knew that, she'd even said so once, long ago. That it wasn't possible to plan in any more detail.

We stared straight at each other, for several seconds.

"We *must not* get split up. You got that?" she said.

Then suddenly she hugged me, warm and tight.

I didn't know what to do. I let her do it. Then she let go, and afterwards she looked surprisingly strict.

"Next," she said. "If we suddenly meet people, out here in the forest for example, what do we do?"

She asked again, before I was forced to answer.

"...the usual," I mumbled. "Hide? Keep quiet? Try and work out which group they belong to."

Anna looked around at the trees, and felt that she could talk quietly rather than whisper.

"Wrong. From now on we're not part of any group, Erik. We're on our own."

I stared straight up at the sky. My arms were tight against my chest and I tried not to think about anything at all.

"If we do meet anyone we have to be prepared," she said. "You do understand that, right? It'll be them or us."

I didn't reply.

She went through exactly how much food and ammo we had, what equipment she'd got hold of.

The list went on and on. I didn't even know what some of the words meant. And I couldn't see how we were going to carry all of it.

She said I needed to get better at handling my pistol, my rifle and my knife, and sharpish.

What is she up to, I thought to myself, what's her plan, what does she actually think I'm capable of?

"I'm going to train you," she went on. "Later. Now we need to get far enough away. Away from Hans. And Tell.

I thought that maybe we'd be heading into the bogs. Lots of people had fled that way. Rumour had it there were pathways through. That it was possible to get through to the other side. Whatever that meant.

I kept my breathing as slow as I could.

She had some sort of plan, that much I could tell. But one she'd rather not share with me.

Right?

Maybe it was out of consideration for me. Or a simple precaution. The less I knew – perhaps even the less scared I got – the easier things were going to be for her.

There were a couple of questions that I definitely wanted to ask though. And she must understand that sooner or later I would.

I decided not to wait.

"Why did Hans make us leave?" I said. "Why do we have to disappear like this?"

She looked at me like I'd asked a question that was far too intelligent for my age.

"I don't know Erik," she said, and attempted a smile. "I don't know."

That fake smile. I recognised that. And the tone of her voice too, from when we were young. Lies remembered.

And I smiled back.

Maybe my doubts were visible in my smile, and maybe she thought that was a bit snide, because she immediately turned her back to me. Neither the look in her eyes nor her body language gave the slightest hint of patience, and I recognised that too – in situations like this I had to keep quiet, never her, and then she grabbed hold of my shoulder through my camo-jacket and shook me hard.

“You’re not being thick again are you? You do know what I’m telling you? We have to leave! There are no alternatives!”

Getting angry. That was her way of getting me to understand.

Don’t ask, obey.

The explanation for this was probably pretty straightforward. It would be to our advantage, further on, if I didn’t know too much. She wanted to protect me from all the risks that always come with knowing.

She did, of course, understand that I realised Hans had given her some kind of explanation. That explanation wasn’t going to get as far as me though.

Actually it did, in the end. But that wasn’t until much, much, later.

I don't want to get ahead of myself. I'm just trying to tell it exactly as it happened.

And I've promised to do one thing, so I'll have to ask for your patience if this get a bit long-winded: It will all be correct in the end, clear and unambiguous.

We were now in a sloping landscape, it had just started getting dark and in a little hollow full of large stones we reached a noisy little stream babbling between stone blocks. There were two huge, round, stone discs in the middle of the watercourse, but there were several pools of what looked like stagnant water alongside the channel. There were insects hovering above them.

"Here," Anna said, pointing at the map. "An old mill. See?"

She pointed to a symbol in the map key and then at a point further into the forest where I could just make out a little mound covered with mature trees which reproduced themselves as tall, spiky shadows.

"Hans' last outpost is somewhere beyond that," she whispered. "We have to make absolutely sure they don't see us. We'll have to keep going a bit further, and then there's a river we're going have to wade across. Then this bit, no-man's land. Then on towards the borders, somewhere over here. The posts on the far side are very close together, we'll have to keep extremely quiet."

I nodded to myself, and shivered – this was concrete information. Saxen had been right, and I'd been wrong. We weren't heading for the bogs. We were going to attempt to cross enemy lines and head east.

I thought to myself: What is she thinking, is she insane?

In the meantime she showed me another detail on the map, a change of colour delineating the arable land from the forestry.

I turned towards her, and was about to whisper that we could stay here anyway, that I really needed a rest, when she whispered reproachfully that I was making a lot more noise than she was, and that I needed to pay attention to where I was planting my boots, how I was carrying my pack and my breathing.

She moved away from the stream, with a watchful look that swept from side to side as she held the Mauser rifle raised in front of her chest.

What was I supposed to do? Object? Shout? Refuse to budge?

I had no choice whatsoever. I had to follow her.

No-man's land.

Something strange happened inside me whenever anyone used that phrase. It sounded old-fashioned. It was real though.

Rumours flew around the chalet camp. There are great big swollen people, the size of cows, lying there in no-man's land. And there are corpses, years old, just skulls and bones left. You can see all the amalgam fillings in their mouths and all the bullet marks on their skeletons.

The remains of two of our geldings are there too – they got stuck in the marshy ground and then sucked half way in before being attacked by wolves later that night. Tales of the sound the horses made, the backdrop of the dark night sky, how they were eaten alive, while our soldiers in their nearby posts couldn't do anything – not even put them

out of their misery - because the muzzle flashes could've revealed their positions.

There are hundreds of unexploded munitions in no-man's land, grenades that had failed to detonate and that you had to steer clear of, and then acres and acres of minefields. There are diamonds spilling from the pockets of the swollen corpses' burst uniforms.

All these stories. Many of which I'd heard straight from Anna.

Close to another hollow, she finally stopped to catch her breath. We were going to have to, as she said, wait for it. She meant the darkness.

We lay still on the floor, on the tree needles. Silently, we batted away the mosquitos that were constantly buzzing around our faces. It got colder, but I was okay. The light in the sky was fading, but for now the light blue was still dominant over the gathering dark blue.

We could hear what sounded like shouting, a long way away, and pricked up our ears. Soon we heard machinery operating, even further away. I had no idea where the sounds might be coming from but it didn't seem to bother Anna in the slightest.

Then came a long silence. Just the rustling of the canopy above.

She whispered to me about Saxen. That he was a fucking idiot, with his gormless, splendid advice – how could he have thought that we hadn't been through stuff ourselves? She said that she regretted having told him that we were leaving. That you never know.

“If I hadn't though, we'd probably never have been allowed to buy.”

After spending more than two hours on the ground there, we pulled ourselves up and carried on, but hunched over now. It didn't feel as though the darkness of the night was embracing us. It was there, forming the backdrop and we were as visible as we had been all along.

I chose not to keep an eye on any particular direction. I followed her obvious profile closely in the gloom, straight into no-man's land, being very careful not to fall even a little bit behind.

My shoulders were tense, I was sweating, I stopped for a pee by a lichen-covered rock while she waited impatiently, and then we carried on through the tree trunks. She hardly looked at the map, she walked deliberately and carefully, picking her path between boulders and copses and clearings and the scent of her kept reaching me, coming in little puffs. We didn't hear any gunfire, not even far away, but every now and then something twitched among the trees and then disappeared: a fawn, hares, tawny owls, shrews. I thought about the tins of ravioli back at R; the crates of rosehip tea and mushroom soup with sell-by dates years in the past, and Anna's scent reached me again and the barrel of the Mauser peeked over her left shoulder all the time and then we walked bent-over through tall grass and there was a strong smell of flowers coming from the ground beneath us but in the darkness I couldn't see what colour they were or what shape and I tried thinking about anything, anything apart from what was in the earth below us, at the borders, or by the other positions over on the far side, straight ahead of us.

Anna's black, slightly bowed silhouette was a constant presence; weak light in the night sky, second-long pauses as she stopped to listen

before we carried on as before, with the smallest possible distance between us, and my footsteps and breathing were quieter now, and I know she noticed because she gave me a commending pat on the shoulders, without looking at me, as we made our way up the steepest incline yet.

Before long I was getting stiffer and stiffer, my breathing was faster, the pack on my back was pushing my shoulders, my knees were burning – and in the end I had to, I had no choice, I put my hand on her neck and whispered as quietly as I could.

“Rest.”

She slowed, looked around and nodded, but there was reluctance in her eyes. She pulled out her canteen, sat down on her haunches and drank without a sound while her grey green eyes glittered in all the blackness, and the whole time she had her fingers ready, hovering close to the rifle’s safety catch and trigger.

“How much further is it to their lines? How are we going to get through?” I whispered.

She didn’t reply, just stood up again and crept stealthily up the slope again and even though I hadn’t finished with my bottle she gave me no choice, I had to follow her straight away and I spilt some water. The air seemed even colder, it smelled of pine resin and spring leaves. Small nocturnal birds I didn’t recognise flew overhead, way above the treetops. I thought about whatever I could, about food, about how the multi-vitamins we used to give the children had run out a few days earlier, about how I’d happened to see Diana stark naked while she was having a wash in the toilet, I thought about the little boy who’d grabbed my leg

and about his favourite toy which was a red wooden dog he called Rakan, about how it felt like I had a cotton drape over my eyes and that some of what little light there was kept getting stuck in it. Her back though, I could see that in front of me the whole time. Anna's back, a narrow oval velvet silhouette.

We just kept going uphill, and I whispered to her again.

“The borders? Their positions?”

She put her hand on my forearm and squeezed it, and the skin on her fingers was so smooth. She was looking at me, that much I could tell, but when I tried to meet her gaze it was as though our eye contact was filtered out by the darkness.

Slowly she whispered.

“We're... already...through.”

Once she'd got all the words out it sounded like she took a swig from her canteen again. Or maybe she just swallowed.

“We've already crossed the lines... Ages ago. Way before this bank. Did you not realise?”

I turned around and stared back in the direction we'd just come from, and things looked the same all over the incline. Tree trunks, narrow ones, thick ones, short, tall – everywhere you looked it was just hundreds of tree trunks pointing towards the heavens.

I realised that I really couldn't say how long it had been since we'd left that last hollow. An hour? Two, three?

“What about the water? The river? All of their positions?” I said.

She brought me further up the hill, we were side by side at that point, it was as though we were floating up rather than walking, and with a quick movement she did something with the Mauser.

“The ground was drier than I was expecting. We got across without even getting the soles of our boots wet.”

She whispered the second part, with a hint of self-satisfaction to her voice, a bit like when we were kids and she managed to beat me in our swimming races from the headland to the jetty by a minute and a half.

I knew that she wasn't really pleased at all. It just sounded like that, but her eyes were steely and hard and part of the Mauser caught the light and I saw that it was the bayonet.

I kept glancing forwards, towards the bats lurching through the air, emitting their broken squeaks, and she carried on picking her way between the pines and I asked myself how it had turned out this way, how she'd found the route, the map, how she'd managed to avoid all of their positions, all of those nights she spent on reconnaissance up in these parts, I thought, all the tasks that she'd carried out for Hans.

And it was like she knew what I was thinking, because she whispered to me again and I felt her warm breath. It smelled sweet.

“Getting over their lines isn't that hard. Yes, a lot of people from our side have been shot around here, those stories are all true.”

She was smiling now, I was sure of it, but not in that normal way, this was a strained, short smile, one that wanted to give a different impression, an unreasonable undertone, and the bayonet blade came up right next to my head, yes, right by my cheek.

She touched my arm again, I didn't get how she was staying so relaxed. We stood there, breathing next to the thick trunks and above us, countless stars appeared in the navy blue sky.

“As you found out, it isn't hard at all, getting over. As long as you know *where* to cross.”

I have to mention Källered. Fröde – I wasn't there. But in Källered I was.

There had been rumours of a large shipment, about trucks, powdered egg and flour and blankets and tetracycline and dried milk, that emergency aid was coming from the Mediterranean – France and Italy. The trucks were to arrive in Källered. This was late March, it was cold and slushy, but a lot of people had made the journey from smaller towns and villages, there were lots of people there. Most of them stayed in the school gym or in the basement of the former town hall, which contained a large bunker room.

No one knew exactly when, everyone just said that, “now, any day now, apparently the trucks will be arriving.”

Me and Anna were in Källered together, so was Monir, her boyfriend, well ex, or whatever. We arrived at the same time as loads of other people wanting to get a bit further north, we'd been there for two days already, slept in a row of terraced houses, we didn't know anyone, at first. While everyone was waiting we helped some medics move all their equipment from the old health centre, which had been destroyed, to an office block. It was hard, monotonous work, we carried stretchers and so many boxes and we only had a couple of trolleys. It did keep us warm though.

On the third day, just after lunch, we heard lorry engines in the distance. The sound was coming from the main road that ran right through the town. I just dropped the boxes of surgical tools and bandages and started running towards the little square in front of the

town hall, which the rumours said was where they were going to pitch up, but just as I rounded the corner of the school building, and saw how many people had already gathered there, Anna caught up with me and barged me into the brick wall, then pulled me backwards so that we were obscured by the corner of the building again.

“What are you doing?” I said.

She held on to me as she listened intently.

“We’re not going to get anything now!” I said.

“Can’t you hear that?” she said. “The engines?”

I listened carefully too, for several seconds.

“That low rumble,” she said, breathlessly. “That’s wrong!”

I didn’t understand. She just stared anxiously ahead before she peered around the corner.

“It’s the wrong noise!” she said.

I stayed there, could see nothing of what was around the corner, I could just see her eyes.

How their expression changed.

“Oh, no...no,” she said then. “Quick.”

She grabbed my arm and pointed at the health centre, towards a clump of trees even further away.

And we ran.

I remember it perfectly clearly, running along just behind her, must’ve been three hundred metres, her back and all those grotty piles of half-melted snow, and then we threw ourselves over a bank of snow and

pushed ourselves into the wet, cold ground, where half-rotten leaves peeked out from underneath a shiny layer of ice.

She got me to crawl even further in, amongst the trees, so that we absolutely could not be seen.

“The trucks, they’ve changed the tarps,” she whispered. “It’s the wrong kind. The revs on those engines, I recognise those sounds a mile off.”

And it was then that I saw – and then that I understood.

Others were fleeing the square now, people were screaming, those that could were running, in all directions.

They were the wrong trucks. This was no aid convoy.

Anna looked around, with her fingers hovering by her pistol holster and her other hand pulling the old bomber jacket tight around her.

“There’s nothing we can do,” she whispered, and I noticed something approaching panic in her eyes. “Just hide. They will have surely surrounded the entire town.”

I could see a tank now too, and several jeeps, I could see soldiers pouring off the flat beds of the trucks, and how they immediately started rounding people up over there.

Something occurred to me.

“Monir?”

“I really don’t know,” she said straight away, a whisper. “Maybe by the river.”

The river. They were building a temporary crossing, to replace the one that had been blown up. Monir was one of those leading the operation.

“There is nothing at all we can do. Lie still!” she whispered again.

We lay there while more and more trucks drove into the crush of the square. German shepherds barked and barked and the soldiers quickly managed to round up a great crowd of people, at least a hundred, and then even more came along, small groups from the residential streets and the terraced blocks, and they just seemed to keep coming.

“Don’t look,” Anna whispered. “You have to promise that you’re not looking.”

I didn’t promise.

I watched them gather up yet more people, it was all so quick. There were old people, young children, I saw several people whose names I’d learnt, there was Alejandro and Per and Miko and Anahita and Linda, and I couldn’t close my eyes or even cover them with my hand. Several of the soldiers had already run ahead to a large old wooden building which used to be a community centre and then I saw another group of soldiers marshalling a number of men in front of them, all of whom were holding their hands above their heads and I recognised some of them – they were all in the group that was building the bridge.

More and more jeeps, all full of soldiers, appeared from various approach routes close to the square, and all of them ushering new groups of civilians in front of them, on towards the open space, in the centre of which was a senior officer waving his arms about.

“Why are you looking? Are you mad?” I heard Anna whisper.

Now the soldiers were moving the crowd, hustling people in front of them, shouting orders and firing into the air and the dogs barked, and

people shouted back, children screamed – there was so much noise you couldn't even hear the engines anymore and everything moved forwards towards the community centre, which by now was surrounded on all sides and its doors were wide open. A large man tore himself from the crowd, he shouted something and punched a soldier before running off towards the woods, but straight away came the volley of gunfire and he fell into a heap.

Before long the soldiers were forcing more and more people into the building, and people were screaming even louder now, and I *knew* it, I knew!

So it went on. They pushed even more people in, and it was soon dangerously full, but they kept pushing, and then all the windows were being smashed from the inside and several teenage boys tried to jump out, but the soldiers shot them straight away, and one of those guys, who I'd seen sitting on a bench smoking the day before, was left hanging from the windowsill with his leg at a freakish angle, and then another group arrived from the direction of the big houses, all old women and they were crying as they headed for the community centre, they held their hands in front of their eyes as the tears came, and then they were pushed through the doors, and even more young families, before the doors were finally shut and the soldiers rolled a log over from one of the trucks so that the doors could not be opened, and the bellowing from inside was very loud now, and some parents let their young children out through the broken windows, they were only three or four years old, but the soldiers were there like a shot and threw them back in, they didn't

shoot them but they really threw them in, and I saw a little boy come out once again, his parents had put him out again, but the same soldier was there to throw him back through the window like a basketball, and I screamed out but it was lost among all the other screams, and Anna was on top of me in an instant, all of her bodyweight pushing down on me and her hands clamped hard over my mouth and my eyes.

“Shut up! You *must* not watch, don’t you get it?!”

Her face by my shoulder. Our breathing. Her fingers against my wet teeth, the smell of breath.

And, through the cracks between her fingers, I could see that her eyes were open.

I could only hear noise.

Flamethrowers, dogs barking. Shouted orders, and then, on an agreed signal, blasts as the hand grenades were thrown in, followed by a series of muffled bangs that drowned out the din, and then machine gun fire, I was lying with my face down.

There was no need for her to keep holding my eyes and mouth closed. She kept doing it anyway.

Yet more gunshots. More grenades. The dark, short bursts from the flamethrowers.

We stayed lying there. She had her hands over my eyes the whole time.

We lay there, motionless, in the woods.

Panicked screams from inside the community centre. The wind blowing straight in our direction. The sparrows chirping in the bushes.

The loud roar of the flamethrowers as the petrol/air mix spewed forth. Like the sound of the gigantic hot air balloons I saw down on the rec as a child. Like the sound of a showerhead exploding under pressure.

And throughout, the sparrows. And the thin layer of ice underneath us.

We stayed lying there as the dusk arrived, and we were still there when the wretched, acrid smoke from the ruins of the community centre started to dissipate.

When it got to late evening, we were still there. And the dogs' barking was audible all along, hour after hour.

The trucks and the tanks eventually left the little square, in the middle of the night, one at a time. Yet I could still hear the sound of the Alsatians barking all around us. We lay face down, as flat as we could. We were pushing ourselves towards the ground the whole time.

I must've been unconscious, must've been in a deep sleep. I could feel a hand hitting my head over and over again and Anna hissing in my ear.

“Now!”

And I tried to get to my feet. Couldn't. I'd lost the feeling in my hands and feet. I was so stiff.

I had frozen solid in the ice.

Anna tugged at me, quietly though, and my jacket ended up getting torn on the chest, but eventually I was able to stand up, and I stumbled, I was so cold I was shaking, but I managed to start moving, and I started trotting after her, straight into the trees, straight into the darkness.

Källered.

No one can even say the word anymore.

I wasn't there in Fröde. It was the same thing though.

The same thing in loads of other places too. We had of course heard the stories beforehand. But it had all happened much further south.

Now it was where we were.

I saw Monir there, outside the community centre. He was there, one of the ones who got pushed through the doors.

And I saw that she'd seen that.

It was after everything that happened in Källered – while we were alone, running across the great frozen black fields that night, and while I could still hear the dogs barking behind us – that Anna started talking about someone she'd heard of, someone called Hans. She decided that we needed to join his group as quickly as possible.

So we were over the line of control. I didn't understand how Anna had done it, but somehow or other we'd made it across.

The incline soon flattened out, we came up onto a sort of plateau where she checked the map and the compass again. The crescent moon had emerged and the grey-blue shine soon became bright and she seemed sure when she pointed straight ahead through the trees that looked almost exactly the same no matter which direction you were facing. I followed and tried to close my eyes as I went, but I stumbled more or less straight away. There was a smell of sludgy mud, the ground was uneven and the trees were shorter, less stout and I couldn't see any water or other open areas.

We heard voices. Men. Far away though. I didn't get it – that they dared talk so loudly. Anna got straight down onto the pine needle covered ground. I lay down close to her but she put her finger to her lips so that I didn't ask any questions. The male voices went on, I couldn't make out their accents, or what they were talking about.

A short, but loud, swishing noise. A flare shot into the sky just to the south of where we were and I pushed my face into the soil.

A kilometre or so away. Max.

Anna gave me a shove and slowly, slowly, we crept along a path, away from light, following a running watercourse.

“Wasn't for us,” she whispered.

We continued as before. The darkness, and our movements cutting through it.

Her first. Then me. I thought to myself: It's never been any other way with us two.

I heard the hooting of a far-away owl and I could sense several bats darting around above us. The air was now much cooler and my thoughts turned to what she'd said about warm clothes.

"Coming through the lines was the least worst alternative," she whispered suddenly, as we carefully picked our way through the darkness.

The ground was still sloping, but much less steeply than before, and the trees were much more mature here, with broad branches and thick bark, the brittle exterior of which crumbled as we brushed past them.

"Given the gear we got hold of," she added. "We just need to get further from the lines now, deeper into the forest, the further we get the fewer people around. We'll have to stay in the forest, and then we'll have to see where we head after that."

It sounded like she was trying to calm herself down.

"Most groups are active in the south and the south east. We might be able to find one we can ally with later. But for now we just have to get far away from these parts," she said.

Just a few seconds later, she said something else. At first, I didn't want to believe what I was hearing. The words though just seemed to keep echoing.

“Especially if Tell comes after us.”

I stopped, and stared, all tensed up, waiting for the rest of her message. That was it though.

Slowly, I said:

“Why... would he do that?”

She stared at the ground for a couple of seconds, her eyes avoiding mine. For her to have an expression like that is very rare.

Then she pulled herself together and stared determinedly into the darkness again.

“Well Tell is, you know... mad,” she said. “Hans said to me that if we disappeared I should be prepared for the risk that Tell might start hunting for us. Or someone else maybe. But Tell was the most likely.”

We stood there as before, waiting, and she seemed to be pretending that all the information she’d left out didn’t even exist.

Because “hunting for us,” could mean only one thing. That he would try and track down and kill us.

I swallowed hard and didn’t know which way to look.

“Why did we have to leave?” I said, in an attempted blindside.

She stayed silent.

“Why would he want to...” I started again, more forcefully, and she cut me off with a ‘shh’.

I noticed that I was short of breath, looked around, in the likely direction of Hans’ camp. There wasn’t so much as a flicker of light from there.

I waited and waited but she didn't answer any of the questions. I realised that the next question would have to be couched a bit differently.

I thought long and hard about what I was going to say.

“So, we've got him after us?” I eventually whispered.

She stood alongside me, so that our shoulders rubbed, and our elbows.

Still no words, just her heavy breathing.

I looked intently at her eyes, which blinked every now and then, after long, pondering stares.

No one knows her as well as I do.

The combination of that kind of breathing and blinking like that always means yes.

We weren't there for long after that. She gave me a barely noticeable nudge with her arm, then we were off.

I spent the whole time trying not to trip over the roots, which looked like spiky snakes, and thinking about forests and how I felt about them and how it smelt sweet in certain spots, like it had when I was young. Out of nowhere, she stopped; her body language communicated a state of high alert. I looked around. To one side I could make out a number of smaller trees that were either lying on the ground or leaning up against each other. It looked weird. There, in the middle of all these tall, straight pines, was a clearing full of spindly deciduous trees that had all been felled close to the ground. She crouched down and felt the surface of a smaller stump.

"Felled with a chainsaw," she whispered. "Fairly recently. A few weeks ago at the most."

We looked around us in all directions but couldn't see any buildings or signs that we might be close to a settlement. She pulled out the map and compass again and her movements made the needle swoop back and forth. She swore and tried to find a spot where the moonlight was stronger.

"We'll change direction," she whispered, finally.

"Look at this," I said.

We were standing next to something that looked like a large wooden crate. It was about a metre high and was cobbled together from red

planks. One of the felled birch trees had fallen right onto the crate and caused a crack along one side. I stared into the split, but it was too dark to see what was in there.

“An old well?”

We looked around again.

No lights, no smoke, no fences. No frontages, no telegraph poles or overhead wires, nothing.

She pointed into the darkness and we quickly moved away from the wooden crate. We crept along as quickly as we could until we were back among thick vegetation again, well inside the forest, and far from the strange clearing with the leaning trees.

Now I feel like I'm getting into it, that the story is moving forward, like there's an overview of the whole thing and you can see the timeline in front of you, that things are being relayed in pretty much the right order.

Right?

As we carried on through the forest I was thinking about what she'd said to me about Saxen. Those little words, I felt like they'd stunned me, and made me somehow angry and disappointed.

Not young like that.

Young like what then?

She was obviously better than me in a host of situations. But then there were times when the opposite was true, at least once.

That was something I felt I should point out.

I kept quiet about that too though.

It was quarter past midnight when she stopped. We were near a lake, the shoreline of which we'd been following at a distance for some time. On the map it was called Maen. We saw glimpses of it like a narrow black belt which the moonlight bounced off every now and then. My night vision was really good by this point, and I noticed that we were pretty close to the bottom edge of the map.

She took her rucksack off with a little groan and, with familiar efficiency, immediately set about gathering pine fronds for the floor of our shelter. I had to assume that she judged it to be a safe enough spot. Not right next to the water, but not far from it either.

I looked at the map again. Maen. Odd name.

“Is there any more to your plan than what you told me before?” I whispered as we carried on preparing for the night ahead. “Where are we going?”

The light was really pretty minimal amongst the trees but I could just tell that she looked a bit unsure again.

“We can't stay too long in the same place – one night, two at the most. The way things are around here, it seems riskier to get stuck in one place than to keep on moving.”

I gave her answer some thought during a long silence. It felt like she was ready for follow-up questions, and she was probably right, we had to get further away from the front lines, further away from populated areas.

And from Tell.

Now, much later, I think she probably just wanted to spare me the uncertainty. She must've guessed that I'd feel more secure if she pretended to know where we were going, beyond just 'away'.

Voluntarily, without another question, she replied:

"I know where we're going. Trust me."

Before I had time to say anything else she shoved the tarpaulin into my arms and asked me to stretch it over the poles and she took one of the pistols and then disappeared for a pee behind a clump of trees.

One of my earliest memories is of me and Anna sitting in the bath, at opposite ends. She's nearly four years older than me, so I must've been two or three.

While we were sitting there I started to pee. I suppose I didn't know any better, and she called out, horrified, and scrambled up onto the side. After a while though she was fascinated by it and we watched the yellow fluid streaming out of me and slowly dissipating in the water.

Now she was going to pee too, she said. She grabbed a shampoo bottle and the shampoo just happened to be yellow. Then she turned the tap on full and poured out the entire contents of the bottle right where the jet was hitting the surface of the water.

After a few minutes the bathtub was full of suds and before long it was overflowing.

We laughed. The foam soon covered the floor right over to the mat and great plumes of soapy white kept on swelling.

Soon I couldn't see Anna anymore, just sheets of foam in every direction, great mountains of froth, and her voice trying to calm me through the roar of the water and I screamed. I didn't know where she was, I screamed and screamed even though everything was so soft and smelled lovely but I was trapped in this impossibly fluffy space, so small, inside a great all-consuming cloud where you couldn't breathe, a cloud that could apparently take on new forms and bank up in a matter of seconds, there was even foam underneath me – that's how it felt.

Then along came her hand, steady and smooth, through all the whiteness, and I grabbed it with my happy little arm. And then I realised where I was again.

I might be exaggerating, after the fact. That might not be exactly how it happened. But that's exactly how I remember it.

I'll never forget that atmosphere, and feeling like that. Her arm pulling me out of weightlessness, dragging me back.

When I woke up I was freezing. It was almost fully light. I wound my wristwatch, saw that it was just past five and I squinted down towards the lake. A handful of ducks were squawking over on a little headland but I couldn't see what kind, whether they might be edible. Apart from them, it seemed like we were completely alone.

Anna was lying on her side at the other end of our lean-to side, facing towards me. The Mauser rifle with its shiny bayonet was right next to her, as was the pistol. Her body was so still that it looked almost as though she wasn't breathing. She was though, deeply yet quietly.

I checked that all of our stuff was still there, where we'd hidden it for the night and then snuck down towards the lake.

It was way bigger than I'd thought during the night, and a cold breeze blew towards me from the bay opposite, making the water choppy, but I could still tell it was going to be a warm day.

I lay there for a while, studying the landscape through the binoculars. Nothing was visible anywhere. So I carried on down towards the water and then tasted it. It wasn't murky. I contemplated filling my water bottle, but it was always risky to do so from standing water, even if you boiled it, and the last thing I wanted at that point was to get ill. A few pond skaters moved across the water's surface. I noted that we must've forgotten to bring anything we could use as fishing equipment. I glanced up towards the shelter, where nothing was moving, and then walked a short distance along the shoreline.

A couple of metres out, under the surface, lay a man. Eyes open, arms outstretched, as if he'd tried to fly. He must've been at least sixty,

with a longish, almost completely white beard. The small waves lapping against the shore rocked the body back and forth as the beard floated back and forth in the weak currents pushing over the reddish sand bottom.

A few metres away from him lay a woman. She was well built and about the same age as him. Her eyes were closed, and she was dressed in some kind of coat.

I thought for a moment about what Anna had taught me in situations like this. So I had another look around, before I took my boots off and waded carefully into the water. It splashed up against my knees, and the water was no more than twelve or thirteen degrees. Now I noticed that the man was wearing a dark blazer and a long coat. Under the blazer I could see a white t-shirt with a red logo – that of a famous chain of health clubs, *Friskis & Svettis*.

I went through his pockets quickly. There was no jewellery, no weapons. Just stones. Each time I happened to brush against his cold, clammy skin, my hand instinctively recoiled.

Neither the man nor the woman had any gunshot wounds. The woman also had a lot of stones in her pockets. She didn't have a wedding ring, nor a necklace.

I stood up straight and looked at them for a moment, then noted that the shoreline here was devoid of loose stones.

Where had they found the stones? That didn't matter. They must've done it together. Picked up stones, waded out into the water, maybe hand-in-hand. They'd managed to disappear, before they were found by some armed group. Perhaps they'd been hiding out in some cabin, deep in the forest surrounding the lake. And then, after they'd sunk, they'd drifted slowly into the shore? Not long ago, a day or so at most. But where had they come from? Maybe there were others? I peered out

across the lake but I couldn't see anything besides the water's uneven surface.

Then I spotted – at the end of the lake, way over to the west. A column of smoke rose from a huddle of red wooden buildings; I think I could see military vehicles on a slope.

I was out of the water like a shot and I rushed back up to Anna.

“We've got to get out of here.”

I tore away the tarp and the mosquito net before she'd even sat up, but the alertness in her eyes came immediately.

“What is it?” and she instinctively took the safety off the pistol while I breathlessly explained about the smoke and why we couldn't fill our containers with water from Maen.