

Johan Høst

The Nation's Gambit

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First published by Vigmostad & Bjørke, 2022

Translated with support from NORLA.

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Easter holiday 2022, day one
Lillehammer Mountains
Norway

Torvald Astrup leaned happily on his ski-poles. The trip up the mountain, the area's best vantage point, had become a fixed ritual. To the west, the sun, which was about to melt into the skyline, cast one final handful of pink rays across the snow-covered plains. Even at 1089 meters above sea level, there was hardly a breath of wind. It was an Easter day that would go down in the cabin log-book as one of the most beautiful ever.

Up here, Torvald could get some long-awaited moments of perfect silence. In the city, the traffic and people created an endless hum that he could never escape, a kind of urban tinnitus. On the windless plain the silence dulled the countless worries and responsibilities he carried in everyday life. Today this idyllic moment was interrupted by the two powerful figures gasping for air 20 meters behind him. Their attempts to keep up with him on the ascent had taken its toll. From the equipment and the clothing, both looked like experienced cross-country skiers, but they moved awkwardly, and the propulsion they generated was more thanks to raw power than technical prowess. Torvald, on the other hand, was thin, wiry, and wore a faded anorak while still managing to look elegant. He was in good shape, and was often mistaken for being in his 40s, but radiated the authority and self-confidence more suited to his real age of 59.

"Excuse me?" said the smaller of the two men, who also did most of the talking for them. Despite being 194 centimeters tall and weighing almost 100 kilos, almost none of which was fat, he still seemed puny compared to his partner.

"Yes?" Torvald replied in an almost exaggeratedly positive tone, even though he knew what was coming.

"If the Prime Minister wants to make it home in time for the Easter dinner at eight-thirty, we should think about heading back to the cabin in a few minutes."

Torvald turned to his two bodyguards. Comically, they were both called Tom, so to avoid confusion they had been re-named Big-Tom and Little-Tom. A bright spark in the national security team had also come up with a collective name: The Two Toms.

"Prime minister?"

He had taken so long to reply that Little-Tom clearly found it necessary to repeat the question.

“Heading back, yes. Message received.”

Little-Tom had been on the job for almost a year and still maintained a correct and professional distance that had rubbed off on Torvald. Although he was prime minister, he wanted to appear like a man of the people. He staggered towards a sign the park authorities had installed many years earlier, and turned to them with a smile on his face.

“Guys, have you seen this? It points out *and* names all the mountain peaks, from here to Rondane and Jotunheimen.”

Lines radiating from the centre of the round brass plate corresponded with each peak’s name, its height above sea level, and distance, as the crow flies, from where they were standing. A pointer, attached to its hub, could be rotated to bring it parallel with the line for each respective mountain-top. Torvald was the first to reach the sign and turn the pointer:

“Skeikampen is quite distinct, 31 kilometres from here. 1123 meters above sea level.”

He closed one eye and aimed the pointer.

“What about Galdhøpiggen?” asked Little-Tom.

Torvald pointed the arrow at Norway's highest peak.

“130 kilometres that way.”

Little-Tom momentarily relaxed and took a look as well.

“And Glittertind is just next to it,” Torvald added.

“That’s wrong.”

Torvald and Little-Tom jumped slightly. Big-Tom wasn’t in the habit of speaking unless it was totally necessary.

“The heights are wrong. It says Galdhøpiggen is 2468 meters above sea level, when it’s actually 2469. And these days Glittertind is 2457 when you include the thickness of the glacier, not 2481 like it says here. Strictly speaking we should refer to its height without ice, which is 2452, since glacier thickness will vary over time. In all fairness.”

Torvald just stared back at him. It was the first time Big-Tom, who only ever replied in monosyllables, had delivered five consecutive sentences in a row.

“Yes, in all fairness,” Torvald said, after gathering his thoughts. “So ... Perhaps we should head back before it gets dark. You know what Ada’s like if we don’t watch the time.”

Lillehammer

Maihaugen Open-Air Museum

At the age of 73, Sigurd Slåttsveen was the oldest guard in the security firm and probably the whole country. His employer was clinging onto him, not just because he was so zealous in his work, but because he voluntarily worked full-time in what was defined and paid as a 12 hours a week job. His reason for this was his love of two things, his Irish setter Cindy, and the open air museum at Maihaugen.

Cindy and the aging security guard strode authoritatively between the centuries-old timber houses. Through his bushy moustache, he inhaled the wonderful scent of tar-covered ore-pine, then stopped beside what is the jewel in Maihaugen's crown, the more than 800-year-old Garmo stave church. As he sat on the church steps stroking Cindy's fur, Slåttsveen felt a moment of magical joy. He had the smell of tar in his nostrils and the familiar rays from the sunset gently tingling his cheeks.

The sound of a car ignition snapped him out of his trance. He shielded his eyes from the sun and peered down towards some old farm buildings at Nordre Jørstad which were now constantly used as a royal residence, especially during the holidays. Two cars with tinted windows cruised slowly up the gravel drive. Slåttsveen leapt to his feet and saluted, frozen, until the royal family had passed through the museum's main gate.

He never got to lower his hand. The shockwave from the explosion was so powerful it threw him back against the church wall, and left him unconscious on the ground.

Sawdust and powdery ash, from what had once been a royal residence, floated to earth and around him.

Mosetertoppen Cabins Hafjell Ski Resort

It was already dark when the trio crossed the downhill slopes and made their way beneath the chairlift. The ski-trail led them down to the resort's main hub where a gondola lift annually transported a million downhill and cross-country skiers. Sprawling across the landscape behind it was Mosetertoppen, one of the country's most exclusive cabin areas. Torvald owned a plot right at the top, but, unlike some of the financial big-shots, he'd made do with a relatively modest hideaway of 130 well-utilized square meters. Its limited space meant the security team had to be accommodated in their own trailer outside. When they reached the gondola, the three-man squad turned right up the floodlit trail that wound its way between the cabins. Powerful LED lights showed the way up the first steep section. But when they reached the top of the slope they could see that the final part of the trail was dark.

Torvald always went full tilt up these last few slopes, and as he passed the last functioning lamppost, he glanced over his shoulder at the two Toms. Their grimacing faces suggested that every fibre of their bodies was almost saturated with lactic acid. It felt nice to know that he was superior to the two beefcakes when there were skis on his feet. On he continued, into the darkness.

Three minutes later he clocked in at the top of the very last hill, just 150 meters from the cabin. He leaned triumphantly on his ski-poles in the light from the nearest cabins and listened out for his rear guard. But he heard no more than his own breathing. Eventually his pulse-rate settled, but he still couldn't hear a sound. He peered into the darkness behind him. The sound of nothing, which he once found so liberating, now felt increasingly uncomfortable. His pulse, which had just settled down, now quickened again. Did something move? Was that a sudden gust of wind, or was someone whispering? He heard it again. Someone groaned. Not in a dramatic or panicked way. It was more like a muffled cry for help.

He knew that he should keep going towards the cabin, he knew the protocol. But it was overwhelmingly possible that one of them may have had an accident, and what kind of man would he be if he didn't offer any help?

The Prime Minister pushed off gently with his ski-poles, and slid apprehensively into the dark silence.

The E6 motorway between Oslo and the Lillehammer mountains

Anton Block, leader of the police SWAT team, Delta, ran his rough fingers through his grey-black hair. As he sat in the passenger seat of the lead car wearing his tactical vest, his cellphone rang. Block raised the phone to his ear while looking scornfully at his colleague, Björk Jónsdóttir, who was clearly amused by the ringtone that had momentarily filled the interior.

“Hi, Solveig,” said Anton. “Look, something serious came up, just when my shift was over. It’s an eight-er, until further notice.”

Anton had the utmost respect for confidentiality, but he also understood the uncertainty that sharing your life with a Delta-boss entailed. So he would grade the operations on a scale from zero to ten to enable his wife, Solveig, to understand how long he would be away from home. The highest grade he’d ever used, a category nine, was the Utøya tragedy, when 69 children and teenagers were murdered by a terrorist at an island summer-camp.

“Yes, I’ll be careful. Love you,” Anton concluded after she had given him the usual reprimands.

“*I’m too sexy?* Do you think that’s a normal ringtone?” Björk asked while he returned his cellphone to his pocket.

“My daughter did it, and I don’t know how to change it. But it’s good to know when it’s the wife calling. It was a hit when I met Solveig in '92 and just became our thing, OK?” Anton replied dryly.

“What about me? Have you given me a ringtone yet?” Björk asked chirpily.

“No, but I’ll set it to ‘Thorn in my Side’ when I figure out how to. You know *Thorn in my side, You know that’s all you’ll ever be,*” said Anton laughing, even when Björk punched him on the shoulder. Her cropped blonde hair and cheerful demeanor gave little warning of the forces concealed beneath her tactical vest.

“Why don’t you just get a managerial job?” she asked when they had stopped laughing. “Wouldn’t your wife prefer you working nine to five?”

“What do you think I’d be like at home after a day of pointless meetings and paperwork?”

“I can imagine it,” smiled Björk.

“Good that you and the wife agree then.”

Anton had declined both the SWAT-team incident commander's post, and several other senior positions within the police. He thrived on the freedom afforded him as team commander and instructor for the Delta trainees. It was unusual for the team commander to go out in the field, but he insisted on it, and so far no one had questioned it.

He didn't know if that was because they didn't want to question it, or if they were afraid to. But he knew that his reputation as a fearless Delta operative had grown, from legendary to almost mythical, after resolving a situation with an East-European gang who robbed a security van a few years earlier. For him, it hadn't been a particularly big deal. He had entered a villa where the heavily-armed gang had barricaded themselves, neutralised all the targets, then carried a large, unconscious Russian out and told the team waiting outside to retrieve the others. Over the years however, the story had expanded in scale and become gradually more impressive. The number of bad-guys had increased, from six to a small army, and the number of 9mm bullets they found embedded in his bulletproof vest when he exited the building rose from two to twenty.

The countryside flew by outside the car window. He was glad he didn't have to sit in the driver's seat. Björk was a good driver, easy to ride with. She was also unique in that so far she was the SWAT team's first and only female operative. Her mother was a renowned Swedish psychologist and her father an Icelandic muscleman who had made a career out of lifting large, heavy objects in Strongman competitions. The family had moved from Sweden to Norway while Björk was in high school, but she coped with the transition so well that she left with a diploma full of top grades. She also made it onto the winners' podium for cross-fit at the European Championships, which meant she was one of the most well-trained people in the world.

All the previous female applicants for the Delta team possessed the two most important factors; mental strength and attitude. But they failed the physical tests. The physical requirements for joining other societal bodies were gender-specific, but for Delta these requirements were equally tough, and unavoidable. They had to be.

Anton glanced over at her. On the first admissions day, she had marched in wearing rainbow-colored gym clothes. She had short, blonde hair that stuck up everywhere, an upturned nose, and a smile that never seemed to leave her face. And Anton fell straight into the trap and completely underestimated her. The last of the physical trials was especially tough for most people, not just the women, and involved carrying an unwieldy sandbag doll weighing 90-kilos – “the partner” – over an obstacle, through a door, up a flight of stairs and then back again. Anton had stood at the final obstacle and watched the floundering and exhausted candidates. When asked

if they wanted to give up, each one had shouted a resounding no. All except for the Swedish-Icelandic troll doll – who just looked at him with a wry smile and asked, “Why would I do that?”

She had thrown the partner over her shoulder one last time, vomited, then climbed over the obstacle and collapsed across the finish line.

It was at that moment it dawned on Anton that he had really found something unique.

He was just about to remind her of the obstacle course when his cellphone vibrated in his pocket.

“No ... you’ve gotta be kidding,” he groaned in disbelief while reading the message.

“What is it?” asked Björk.

“Tord Fure is waiting for us in Lillehammer, he’s coming with us.”

“The head of PST?” Björk looked at him in disbelief before she fixed her gaze on the road again.

“The one and only. Turn off at the gas station.”

Anton Block found himself relegated to the back seat. Tord Fure, head of the Police Security Service (PST), climbed into the car and immediately pressed his cellphone to the side of his sun-tanned yet worried-looking face. There was just over a year left before he would reach the magic 57-year threshold, retirement age for police officers, and Anton figured that he wasn’t keen on getting a difficult case that might taint his legacy and create paperwork lasting well into retirement. Tord Fure had a cabin nearby, and liked going on long skiing trips around Norway's best trails on his days off. He was never out in the field. But perhaps he felt that this was too big, and too close, for him to stay away?

Anton sighed, thoroughly unexcited about having the head of the security service in tow. The man was guaranteed to make their job more difficult.

“Thanks. Received!”

Fure’s cellphone sank into his lap as he scratched his thinning, silver-gray hair.

“So we’ve got four roadblocks in place. One on Highway-4 southbound and three on the E6. We’ll also have two checkpoints on Highway-3 northbound and southbound up and ready within half an hour. All five available choppers are airborne and covering a 4000-square-kilometre search area across all of Lillehammer’s mountains. All border crossings and the airport are on red alert. Chief Inspector Torgersen of the Lillehammer police is at the cabin. But there’s still no trace of the Prime Minister. Or Myhren for that matter.”

“Myhren?” Anton asked.

“Yes. Tom Myhren. One of the two bodyguards who accompanied the prime minister is missing too.”

Anton took his own cellphone out again and quickly flicked through the national news headlines. All the papers were running screamers about the bomb at Maihaugen. VG's was the most dramatic of the bunch, KING BOMBED. Aftenposten had gone for a more restrained POSSIBLE BOMB ATTACK AGAINST ROYAL FAMILY. The Prime Minister was strikingly devoid of media attention.

“Still nothing about Astrup in the media. When do we have to go public?” asked Block.

“It's still a chaotic situation. We need time to work in peace, so we can justify waiting a bit longer before making any overall safety assessment. When I go to the media, I want to show them the fucker trying to screw up my retirement. In handcuffs.”

Tord's voice revealed both his anger and despair, and it was clear that Block's assumptions had been right. For the past fifteen years, the PST chief had never missed a chance to drum the maxim “*each day that goes well, brings you closer to the day it goes wrong*” into the heads of the bodyguards and the Delta team. To lose the Prime Minister, the most important item in the portfolio, was a monumental failure.

Mosetertoppen Cabins

Fure tore the door to the Prime Minister's cabin open, and marched into the living room before Anton or Björk could stop him. “What the fuck were you thinking?” he roared at Chief Inspector Torgersen and Big-Tom who was lying on the sofa not looking at all well.

“You had one fucking job, to look after the Prime Minister, *not* the royal family, you useless fucking idio...” Anton stopped him with a firm hand on his shoulder, and nodded towards the dining room. Tord hadn't noticed Ada Astrup, Torvald's wife, who was sat at the table crying. Anton walked over to her and apologised on Tord's behalf.

“We're doing everything we can to resolve the situation. We'll find your husband. It's going to be fine,” he assured her, before returning to the sofa where Big-Tom had been given a shot of adrenaline to shake him out of his stupor. He was clearly still groggy after the thirty minutes he'd spent lying unconscious in the snow a few hours earlier.

Anton crouched beside him.

“What happened?”

“We went skiing along a pre-agreed route. We stayed within the timeframe. When we reached the floodlit trail the Prime Minister went for it, as he always does, and as we skied up the last slopes we were just trying to keep up. Then Little-Tom ... I mean ... Tom Myhren suddenly collapsed. I stopped to see what was wrong, and felt a sharp pain in my neck. After just a few seconds I felt dizzy and everything went black. I don't remember anything else other than waking up a few hours later.”

“You didn't notice anything or anyone nearby? Did you hear or see anything? Anything unusual?”

“Only that the lights on the trail were off.”

Anton patted Tom on the shoulder and stood up.

“He was shot with a tranquillizer.”

Chief Inspector Torgersen held up a silver dart with a red tassel at the blunt end.

“It usually takes at least a minute for something like this to work. But both guys would have been at their max pulse rate, so the anaesthetic would have spread to their brains instantly.”

“Both guys? Tom Myhren is only missing, how do you know he was shot too? Have you found more darts? Or are you *guessing* now?” Anton asked.

“Well ... since Little-Tom *is* missing too, like you say, it's natural to...”

“You're *guessing*?” interrupted Anton.

“Did you hear the sound of a dart? Did you see a dart hit Little-Tom?” Björk asked while facing Big-Tom.

“No, I just saw him lying in the snow.”

“OK,” said Anton while looking the PST chief in the eye.

Large snowflakes filled the sky as Anton led Tord, Björk and Chief Inspector Torgersen up the floodlit trail. All they could see were the contours of a hollow in the snow, which the fresh snowfall and light wind was gradually smoothing out. An officer stood guard by the police tape, which had been strung between the pine branches and sealed off a roughly one hectare area. A temporary crime-scene barrier – a pop-up tent borrowed from the ski center's marketing department – was also in place. It had a roof, but no walls.

“The dog units arrived hopelessly late due to the holidays and all the chaos with the bomb attack at Maihaugen,” said the policeman shivering.

“Hopeless, no fucking shit!” hissed the PST chief just loud enough for the policeman to hear it, while Anton turned towards an old snowcat that was emerging from the snow. A stocky, ruddy-faced guy, bespectacled and in his 50s, jumped out of the vehicle.

“Park Manager Svein Plukkerud!” said the man, straightening the round frames of his spectacles.

“I was told to come ASAP.”

“Anton Block.” Anton shook his hand.

“Have you got video of everyone who passed through the security-gate to the cabin area?”

“Yes.”

“Good – we need footage going as far back as possible. Several years preferably.”

Plukkerud thought for a moment before nodding.

“Have you logged or received any reports of deviations from daily routines?” Anton continued.

“Nothing except for a safety alarm on the lights we use for the trail.”

“OK. Thanks for coming at such short notice by the way,” said Anton nodding discreetly to Plukkerud.

The other members of the group were more concerned with examining the surroundings which were now lit by the snowcat’s headlights.

“What we have to work with ...” began Chief Inspector Torgersen, clearly trying to avoid the looks of disappointment from everyone there, “are footprints left by what we believe are military overboots. Since overboots are worn on top of hiking boots and so on, it’s impossible to say anything specific about the shoe size. Maybe somewhere between 40 and 45? And we’re pretty sure we’re dealing with just one person. Otherwise there are tracks from a snowmobile and trailer. Do you know anything about the snowmobile, Plukkerud?”

“From the track patterns and width of the belt, it could be a Lynx Ranger,” said Plukkerud after pausing to think for a moment. “But it’s almost impossible to say. At Easter, the maintenance people drive around the cabins day and night. They use Lynxes. The Red Cross use Lynxes too, and the ski centre often drive a lot in the afternoon. There are tracks like these criss-crossing the whole area.”

Björk checked Google on her cellphone, and found that Norway had 120,000 registered snowmobiles.

“No chance,” she muttered.

Anton searched the area once more but found no other signs of the drama that had unfolded hours earlier. All the potential evidence and clues had been more or less erased, there was no point in him suggesting they find a makeshift tarpaulin to shield the crime-scene from the wind and snow.

“How far away are the forensics?”

“We’ve got a team just starting work at the scene in Lillehammer. We’re struggling because of the holidays, but we’ll get another team up here tomorrow,” said Chief Inspector Torgersen quietly.

“Then get the Lillehammer team here right now. This is a priority one! Whatever else comes up. Lillehammer is priority two. Is that understood?” commanded Anton, his tone of voice leaving no doubt about the importance of his message.

“Understood,” replied Torgersen, before following the PST chief who had started heading back up to the cabin.

Anton shook his head in despair at Björk and was about to ask what she made of it all, when Plukkerud held something in front of them and chuckled.

“Someone will be wondering, now that their king is missing,” he said, clearly regretting the comment already. “Yes, well, it’s probably a stupid thing to mention now, but someone left a king on the transformer box, just poking out of the snow. Look.”

It was a black chess piece.

“Where did you say you found it?” Anton asked, carefully taking the piece from Plukkerud's hand. Björk stood ready with a ziplock bag, which Anton dropped the piece into.

“Here. On the transformer box!”

Plukkerud shuffled the ten meters it was to the transformer box, a green, meter-high square where a thick layer of freshly settled snow had accumulated. Before Björk and Anton could say a word, he reached out and started brushing away the snow. And as the air filled with white mist a black projectile flew out and landed between Björk and Plukkerud.

“Stop!”

Björk just managed to prevent the all too enthusiastic Plukkerud from picking the black lump out of the snow. She fished out another small ziplock bag from her thigh pocket, turned it inside out, and with her hand still inside, picked up the black object. After turning the bag the right way round, she then held both of the bagged chess pieces up to the light from the snowcat again. Pulling the clear plastic tightly round the bottom of each piece she could see the numbers 6 1 2 1 7 branded onto the base of the king, and the letters Å and P under the pawn.

“Not much of a chess game without a king,” chuckled Plukkerud, while standing on his toes trying to see over their shoulders. “Can’t win without a king. On the other hand, if you don’t have a king you’ve got nothing to lose.”

Easter holidays 2022, day two

San Sebastián, Spain

The light, and a faint vibrating noise woke Viktor Fløysland the President of the Norwegian Parliament. A thin ray of sunshine cleaved the heavy satin curtains at the Hotel Santa María and scored a line across his naked, slender body.

Viktor attempted to regain some control over his thoughts, which were swimming in a daze of medication and several bottles of 96-year-old Dom Pérignon. Like the champagne the hotel was super expensive, but quality has a price. Beside him on the bed lay a young, British redhead called Cathy. Viktor was especially pleased to have landed a specimen born so late in the 80s. Lying spread-eagle on her stomach, she looked almost like a polar-bear rug. Her skin was lily-white, but her claws were painted bright red.

The electric-shock-like buzzing started again. Still feeling disorientated, he grabbed a metallic dildo sporting a Union Jack motif to check that it was turned off, then quickly let go of it when the obviousness dawned on him: The phone!

He dug his cellphone out of the Armani blazer buried under Cathy's sequin dress. 18 missed calls. All from the same number. The anxiety coiled its way up his throat and felt like it was choking him. He was shaking so much he barely managed to return the call.

“It's Fløysland. Sorry, my phone was on silent.”

He listened to the almost incomprehensible message from Edvald Mowinckel, the Secretary of Parliament.

“Oh shit! Message received. Bilbao airport in two hours.”

Viktor just managed to reach the toilet before vomiting. He tried sorting through the emotional chaos the short phone call had stirred, but dominating it all was the panic-attack. The last time he suffered this bad a seizure was 15 years earlier when a reporter from VG rang to claim that the newspaper was publishing photos of him and a player in the Norwegian men's football team having a passionate sexual encounter. The story itself had been true. But he came out of it unscathed. Now this trembling leaf needed “the pharmacy” to help him become the same badass he once was. Super Goof needed his peanuts.

The pharmacy was a red, oval Samsonite suitcase containing a selection of prescription drugs that would have made even the shadiest Hollywood doctors nod in recognition. Viktor knocked back twice the recommended daily dose from two pill-bottles, supplemented by a third drug up the nose. He then slid, hiccuping, down the toilet seat, hoping the cocktail of alprazolam, codeine and cocaine would hold his frayed nerves together and also get him back on the plane.

Minutes later, this nervousness had been forged into steel-armoured confidence. Viktor Fløysland smelled like sawdust from the political circus ring. As President of the Parliament he was, in theory, the kingdom's highest-ranked person outside the royal family. Now, with the Prime Minister missing and the nation in crisis, this theory – in a manner of speaking – was now practice. He admired himself in the bathroom mirror. The combination of thick, dark-blond hair, chalk-white teeth and skin he cared for meticulously with expensive creams, made him look ten years younger than 57. Ten years *at least*. His deliberately sonorous voice made him irresistibly charismatic, a fact repeatedly proven to him whether the goal was sex or political power. He envisioned his own name among the stars of the political cosmos beside his role model, C.J. Hambro, the powerful President of the Parliament who had saved both the king and government during World War II by commissioning a train to help them escape from Oslo. Hambro was also the brain behind the Elverum Authorisation, which gave the government complete authority to govern the country during the war until Parliament could meet again. Hambro died on December 15, 1964, the same day Viktor was born. It was an omen.

“Viktor Fløysland, President of the Parliament and future folk hero.”

He smiled to himself and went out to pack. The polar-bear skin was still asleep and didn't stir until he was dressed and stood ready with his suitcase in front of the bed.

“Where are you going? Come back to bed,” Cathy ordered.

“Sorry. Urgent business in Norway.”

“But I want to fuck...”

Viktor looked down at his erection which the two Cialis he'd taken were still maintaining after five hours. He then checked the time. Variables such as the driving time to Bilbao Airport, the holiday traffic and priority check-in all immediately fell into the equation. In a split second he had formulated an answer. If he accepted Cathy's offer, it would make him exactly four minutes late for check-in.

“For once, I must say ... I have better things to do.”

Lillehammer Hospital

Anton always felt uncomfortable in hospitals, and Lillehammer's grey, twelve-floored mastodon was certainly no exception. He was tired and nauseous.

“Hey, Björk,” he said as they walked down a corridor that stank of urine and medicine. It was well past midnight and silent except for the constant beeping coming from some of the rooms.

“There was something I...”

“Yes?”

“...I wanted to tell you...” Anton stammered, nonplussed by how damned hard it was to talk about. He had told aspiring Delta cadets that their dreams of being accepted were shattered, he had notified parents that their children had been brutally murdered. But when it came to things concerning himself, he couldn't do it. He should at least be able to tell his wife first, he thought.

“Forget it,” he said as they reached the correct door. “You're leading as usual, right?”

Björk looked at him quizzically, but let it pass. She knocked on the door to room 46 of the outpatient ward and stuck her head inside.

“Sigurd? Sigurd Slåttsveen?”

Both Anton and Björk had been ordered to go straight back to Oslo, to help coordinate the rest of the operation, but they agreed it might be worth spending a few minutes questioning the only witness of the Maihaugen bombing.

“Hm? Yes?”

Slåttsveen squinted at them.

“Did we wake you up?” Björk asked.

“No, no,” said Slåttsveen, clearly lying and forcing a jovial smile when he saw the uniformed couple.

“Oh that's good. Could we have had a quick chat, between servicemen?”

Anton was constantly impressed by Björk's ability to disarm whoever she spoke to. Whether she was confronted by skepticism, a bad mood, a knife or a baseball bat. Whether she needed to resort to charm or muscle-power.

Slåttsveen's room was south-facing and had a view of Maihaugen, which was a mere 300 meters away as the crow flies. He pointed out the window at the lights below and told them willingly about what had happened when the bomb exploded, where the royal family's cars were at the time, about the concussion he had suffered, and about

how worried he was about his dog Cindy, who had probably sustained both PTSD and hearing damage.

“Have you seen anything unusual at Maihaugen recently? Especially near the royal residence?” Anton asked.

“Recently? Nope. Nothing’s happened there since the building was done up last summer. They fixed the roof and laid a new floor in the attic.”

Anton and Björk took the Land Cruiser around the block and up to Maihaugen. When they arrived at the bombsite Anton was pleased to find that there were security guards, not policemen, guarding the area. Anton showed his police badge to the guards who confirmed that the police had been posted to a different assignment a few hours earlier.

Björk and Anton walked over fragments of timber towards the stone steps, which had shattered and been blown several meters from their original place. The crater, just within the foundations, left no doubt as to where the explosives had been located. Beneath the floor of the entrance hall.

“What do you think?” said Anton.

“It’s most likely the bomb was planted at least a year ago. This is someone with a long-term objective. And it’s more than one person. They’ve got time and patience. Had they planned on killing the royal family, they’d be dead already. Why be so careful with the planning, yet so careless with the execution?” said Björk in a questioning tone.

“I agree. But what I meant was the connection between the Prime Minister and the bomb,” Anton replied.

Björk hesitated.

“My gut feeling is that there is a connection. Let’s hope so.”

“Let’s hope that there's a connection?”

If whoever planned this was totally ruthless, they’d never have allowed the royal family to escape unharmed. And then someone bothered to anesthetize both Toms rather than go the easy route and just shoot them, or at least shoot Big-Tom who they didn’t kidnap. They both seem like parts of a plan. And if that’s true, that they’re parts of a plan, there will be a pattern and a motive, which will make it easier for us to find the perpetrators,” she said.

“I agree,” said Anton again, very happy with his protégé’s line of thinking.

“But on the other hand,” said Björk smiling, “it could be that they’re two separate incidents, or that there’s a ruthless, crazy psychopath on the prowl who wants to kill everyone and was just a bit unlucky when trying to whack the royal family.”

Oslo Airport Gardermoen

On day two of the Easter holidays, things were simmering at Oslo Airport due to a mix of frustrated travellers waiting for delayed flights and the increasing numbers of police officers and security-guards patrolling the building. In the midst of all this chaos was Viktor Fløysland. The suit-wearing President of the Parliament could easily have been mistaken for a pilot as he zigzagged between the package tourists who were in less of a rush to leave the arrivals hall. Behind a group of excited pensioners holding Norwegian flags and bunches of flowers, stood a cheerful and blond policewoman in uniform. Viktor didn't see her in the crowd until he had passed through the revolving exit doors and suddenly noticed her walking beside him.

"Hi, Viktor Fløysland," she said in the tone a street salesman might use when trying to sell you a phone subscription you don't need.

Under normal circumstances Viktor would have jumped as if the devil had tapped him on the shoulder. But a good combination of the ADHD-drug Modafinil and an amphetamine variant he'd been prescribed had dulled his reflexes. From the uniform details, the service weapon and physique he quickly deduced that she had to be the woman in the SWAT team he'd heard about. He could also imagine her naked on all fours in front of him.

"Good afternoon, miss..."

"My name's Björk."

"Enchanté, Miss Björk," said Viktor.

"There's a car waiting, Fløysland," she replied unfazed and equally cheerful.

"Have Delta started doing a taxi service?"

Björk laughed politely and offered her hand.

"Your suitcase, Fløysland."

"Thank you, but I'm happy to carry it myself."

As long as his arms were intact, he would never entrust his suitcase to a woman.

Björk led him towards the north end of the terminal, where a black Toyota Land Cruiser was waiting.

"Toyota? I'm more of a Mercedes G-Class man. You can make a note of that for next time," said Viktor, getting nothing but another polite smile in response to his dry jokes.

"If you will. Fløysland."

Björk whipped the suitcase from his hand, and opened the door of the armoured car. Viktor blurted out a reluctant thank-you and reassured his inner gentleman that it

was a serviceman – not a woman – who had opened the door for him. The car had tinted windows and a dark interior, so he didn't notice the black-clad figure in the back seat until he was sat beside him.

“Mr. Block himself! It's comforting to see that PST have sent out the A-team,” Viktor said, greeting the legendary Delta member with polite enthusiasm.

“It's the least I could do. How was the journey back?”

He had missed his connecting flight from Schiphol, and due to the delays caused by the chaos at Oslo Airport had spent over 12 hours travelling. Viktor could easily have spent half the car journey lamenting the country's main airport's poor ability to tackle emergencies, but instead brushed aside Block's invitation to make small-talk and got straight to business.

“It was total hell, but enough about that. I want a full briefing. Everything you've got. Better with too much than too little. Give me a chronological account of the events, starting from Saturday.”

Block was so precise with the details that the car was halfway to Oslo before he reached the most important event of the day, the formation of the crisis team. Åse Prahner, the Minister of Justice and Public Security, had been holding crisis meetings with the available government members, as well as the head of PST and the chief of police, throughout the afternoon and evening.

“The Minister of Justice and Public Security, wants a dedicated crisis team. This is being defined as a terrorist attack. The team will have direct support from the relevant parliamentary committees and emergency units, which are of course mobilised and on red alert.”

“And who will be in this dedicated crisis team?” asked Viktor, like an over-excited footballer wondering if he was in the starting lineup.

“In addition to the Minister of Justice and Public Security herself, Amir Kahn the chief of police and Tord Fure the head of PST will be chiefly responsible for the security of the royal house and the investigation into the Prime Minister's kidnapping, respectively. The Defence Minister is on a business trip to New Zealand and won't make it back. So the two remaining staff will be you and Foreign Minister Larsen.”

“Jan Tore Bjørnæs Larsen?” Viktor exclaimed in disbelief.

“Yes.”

Anton said no more, but Viktor noticed the pleased look Björk gave her superior in the rearview mirror. Jan Tore Larsen was far from the sharpest knife in the political drawer. It was common knowledge in Parliament that his party loyalty and unique network-building skills were the only reasons he had been appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs. The new position would be like steroids for his self-esteem, Jan Tore Larsen had said himself that he aspired to be the next Secretary-General of the UN.

The opposition and younger forces in his own party saw him as barely capable of running the cloakroom in the Parliament's foyer.

"The team and all the committees involved have been informed about the crisis," Block continued. Those not already in the city will be arriving over night. Everyone on the team must meet no later than 07.00 at the President of the Parliament's office. If there is no change to the threat level, Prahner will hold a press conference in Parliament's central hall at 10.00, and she wants you to lead it."

Viktor turned away from Block to hide the smug grin he was struggling to contain. A few moments later he said:

"Okay, but what the fuck's *really* going on, Block?"

Anton hesitated, and once again exchanged glances via the mirror with his young colleague in the front seat. For a moment Viktor began to wonder what kind of relationship the two really had, but he shook it off. Block was straight. Boringly straight. Wife and kids. Never made a mistake, as far as he knew. Maybe that explained why he looked so drawn – it had to be tough being so fucking dependable all the time.

"To plan such a large operation, without PST or anyone else detecting anything, is one thing," Block began. "And then there's the way it was carried out. The country's most heavily guarded person and an elite bodyguard vanish without a trace. An operation like this would have been extremely time-consuming and demanding. So we think it's a small part of something bigger. The tip of an iceberg. It's all been perfectly executed."

"But if it's so perfect, why was the attempted assassination of the royal family such a failure?"

"Our theory right now is that the bomb attack was a diversion. The goal wasn't to kill anyone. The bomb had been planted several months earlier. Since then, the royal family drove past numerous times. The car today had been driving at normal speed, and nothing indicates that there was anything wrong with the detonator. So why trigger the bomb a few seconds late? Add that to what happened to Big-Tom, the bodyguard, who was drugged ... It would have been safer and easier to just kill him there and then."

"Maybe it's a pacifist or some kind of activist wanting to make a point. Maybe they'll return Astrup if we leave NATO and spend the defence budget on the environment?"

Viktor smiled with grim humour.

"We can hope," Anton said dryly.

The car passed IKEA. Viktor's chest felt hot and there was a numb tingling sensation in his groin. Not unlike the feeling he had had 24 hours earlier, when a young, red-haired woman had agreed to come up to his room.

The nation was facing what was potentially its biggest crisis since World War II. His office was like a command centre, and he would be the messenger who would shine in front of the assembled media, and offer comforting words to millions of worried Norwegians.

Thursday after Easter 2022

Hamar Industrial Park

Glenn Rino Åvik stamped his clogs in time to AC/DC's "Thunderstruck." He'd been driving long-distance all night and had just one last, daybreak assignment before he would take three well-deserved days off. A combination of nuclear-strength trucker's coffee and AC/DC had been doing a great job of keeping him awake.

With an imaginary mic in his hand, he and Brian Johnson sang in unison, while his other hand – unless forced to occasionally grab the wheel – played air guitar. This extra job made a welcome change from the long hauls he did on the continent. Picking up a trailer outside Hamar and delivering it by nine-thirty to a building site in Oslo would be a cinch. He'd also been paid in advance, and for a higher than usual rate. In a text message, the contractor had apologised that no one could be there, but they both figured it would be OK provided the trailer was ready and the fee had been paid. Totally happy with that, Åvik had thought, before dropping the pleasantries and hitting the road.

The container was there as agreed. Åvik reversed the cab and hooked up to the trailer, then walked round doing the routine checks on the wheels and plates. Everything seemed perfectly as it should. In addition, the container was emblazoned with the respected Toten Transport logo. When pulling a Toten trailer, he would always laugh about what German road-users made of the name. *Toten* Transport – logistics of the dead.

He climbed into the cab with a smile on his face, let Angus Young set the mood with the riff from "Back in Black," and left Hamar while singing at the top of his lungs.

Parliament

Parliaments in other countries will often be situated on a hill looking down on the hoi polloi, with a secluded and protected debating chamber at the heart of the building. Norway's Parliament is accessible from street level, in the middle of the city, and has a debating chamber with large windows that expose it to the people. The whole building reflects the basic tenets of Norway's political and parliamentary system: openness and accessibility, as Viktor would say whenever he got the chance.

In the wing to the left, on the same floor as the debating chamber, is the building's finest and most spacious office, equipped with its own meeting table, sitting area, fireplace, and with windows on three sides. But while Viktor considered the office worthy of a President of the Parliament, there was one thing that continually annoyed him. The building's façade was protected by the Directorate for Cultural Heritage, including the windows which had been installed at a time when sound insulation was a foreign concept. Every spring, Viktor would be driven half-mad by buskers, who, in wild, tuneless abandon polluted the capital's main boulevard, and his office, with an unendurable racket. So he was delighted about the raised security level. Experience had shown that armed police were a great deterrent against what he liked to call panpipe-terrorists. The five members of the crisis team could now sit at the rounded oak table and concentrate, undistracted.

Viktor always sat himself at the head of the table, with his back to the windows that faced the debating chamber. It was his regular seat when receiving state visits and holding difficult meetings, and suited his role as host and chairman. It also allowed him to keep track of time via the small aluminium clock hanging above the main door.

It was customary for the highest-ranking guests to sit with their backs to the main door, to offer them the views of the palace through the triple-arched windows. Foreign Minister Larsen was well aware of this, and was clearly marking his territory by sitting there himself. Viktor let him sit, knowing that should a war of words break out between them it would be like a superpower facing a ten-year-old with a bow and arrow. Larsen was just a tawdry career politician with a hearing aid. In any case, it would leave Viktor more time for the Minister of Justice and Public Security, who was sitting beside him.

Åse Prahner, whose rounded form belied a razor-sharp intellect, had just turned 60. As usual, she was wearing her distinctive orange spectacles which contrasted with her otherwise black outfit. Prahner was one of the very few women Viktor admired, and who he hadn't simultaneously considered sleeping with.

One person Viktor *did* have the odd sexual fantasy about, however, was sitting directly opposite Prahner: Oslo's chief of police, Amir Kahn. Kahn's parents were immigrants from Pakistan which made him a poster-boy for Norway's integration policy. There was something about his dark, well-groomed and uniformed masculinity that pushed Viktor's buttons. Beside Khan sat the hot and bothered PST chief, who had explained in far too many words that they were no closer to locating the Prime Minister, and that no demands whatsoever had been made by the kidnappers.

Victor felt at a slight advantage following Block's briefing the previous day, and comfortable in the role of the silver-tongued poker player who would lay his cards on the table for the media and general public. The strongest cards at least. He would tell the truth as best he could, wrapped in a grandiloquent veil of emotions and history. This was an attack on democracy and the Norwegian people. Someone had their hands round the throat of Norwegian principles and wanted to choke the freedom and wellbeing we take for granted. He also considered weaving the Utøya attack, World War 2, and the signing of the constitution into his statement.

Jan Tore Larsen had insisted on summoning his own personal speechwriter, but luckily Prahner felt there would be too many cooks, and that Viktor was more than capable of writing something within the advised framework. Just as Larsen was obviously about to respond by citing some meaningless principle, the office door opened and Edvald Mowinckel, the Secretary of the Parliament, appeared in the doorway looking pale.

In recent years digital-TV had changed the habits in the President of the Parliament's office. The old screen they used to wheel in and out had been scrapped. Now two large computer monitors stood on the president's desk, to the left of the door. Viktor angled the largest monitor towards the meeting-table, and switched it on.

The news on TV-2 was showing a film of the Prime Minister, who was clearly drugged, and sitting on a dark, throne-like chair. His eyes were half open and dazed, and he wore a black tunic decorated with the silhouette of a white chess piece – a King. Beside him, in a matching stool – and similarly dressed and drugged – sat a similarly dazed looking bruiser which Viktor assumed was Tom Myhren. The only difference was that his tunic had a white pawn on it.

A computer-generated voice read the text scrolling across the screen.

The powers have changed the rules of the game. Greed and arrogance are rewarded. Righteousness and accountability are punished. When the powers no longer serve the people, the people have a duty to challenge the powers.

A news anchor then appeared on the screen.

“The film, which has been published online and is genuine according to our experts, raises many questions: Has the Norwegian Prime Minister really been kidnapped? Why have neither the Norwegian public nor the media been informed about the incident? Why are neither the police nor the government responding to our inquiries? We’ve been notified of a press conference in Parliament at 10 am, but we don’t know if this has anything to do with...”

The news anchor was cut short by Viktor pressing mute on the remote control.

He looked at the gaping faces around the table, and thanked the heavens for the cocktail he’d fixed himself in the toilet before the meeting. Prahner the Minister of Justice and Public Security, Larsen the Minister of Foreign Affairs – yes, even the PST chief and the chief of police – all looked shocked.

“We have to bring the press conference forward. Right now there are hundreds of representatives, not to mention a few million Norwegians, all wondering what’s going on,” said Viktor full of fighting spirit and an increasing amount of adrenaline.

“Calm down Viktor,” said Larsen, the first person to regain his speech. “We need to consolidate, take our time, and weigh our options.”

Viktor thought it was perhaps best to crush Larsen's ego immediately, so he loaded his cannon with a quote from Theodore Roosevelt and fired back at the foreign affairs minister.

“In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing,” said Viktor rising to his feet and pushing his chest out.

Larsen backed down the moment he realised nobody was giving him any support.

“We’ll bring the press conference forward and hold it in 15 minutes. Actually it will be more of a short statement than a conference. I expect the papers, and news channels are here already. But we’ll stream the whole thing, so anyone that misses it can watch it online. That way, we’ll buy ourselves some time.”

Viktor paused for a moment, while glancing at the clock above the door.

“So minus walking time, that leaves us twelve minutes and 30 seconds to agree on what to say. Fure and Kahn, call the agencies and get a status update. Larsen, summon all the MPs that are here for a briefing in the debating chamber as soon as possible. In the worst case during, but preferably before the press conference.”

Viktor stopped and turned to Prahner, remembering that she was after all the leader of the crisis team.

“Prahner, I hope this plan for the next few minutes is something you can vouch for as chief of staff. Correct me by all means if I’ve overstepped my authority. I also

expect you'll be taking responsibility for informing the MPs in Parliament, while I'm holding the press conference.”

“That's fine Viktor. And, yes, I'll take care of informing the MPs,” said Prahner with a patronising and motherly face, an expression Viktor easily brushed off since he had them all by the balls.

Fourteen minutes later, a stoic and confident President of the Parliament entered the prestigious central hall, which was a scene of absolute chaos. To Viktor it felt like a gale was blowing through the corridors, swirling the press people, security personnel and MPs around the room. But upon Viktor's arrival things quietened in a matter of seconds, like the moment of calm before the storm really begins.

Oslo Police Headquarters

A command centre for the operation was established in a small office, shielded from the open-plan area, at the centre of Oslo's main police station. Here, Anton Block, Police Inspector Alexander Ojdanić (also known as “Sasha”) and three other policemen stood looking at a wall of maps, photos and information. Their five heads turned abruptly as Björk tore the door open...

“Block! Down to forensics. Now!” she commanded, in a tone Anton only ever heard on critical assignments when their veins were pumped with adrenaline. He leapt out of the room behind the Swedish-Icelandic Speedy Gonzales, who was already way ahead of him.

Syver Ellefsen didn't flinch. Even though Björk almost kicked the door in, he just sat there calmly while typing on a tablet. Ellefsen looked a bit like Gus Goose, spoke extremely slowly in a broad, mid-Norwegian accent, and some believed that he was fairly high on the autism spectrum. He had unlearned the instinctive reaction people get from hearing loud, unexpected noises. An invaluable skill as long as part of your job involves deactivating bombs.

“This is pure. 100 percent pure. Not even a speck of explosives,” Ellefsen said in his characteristically sedate tempo.

“What about fingerprints? Or anything else?” asked Björk slightly out of breath.

“Nothing! One cardboard box with a chess pattern and text. One eighteen inch Samsung tablet, password protected,” said Ellefsen handing Anton the box and tablet.

Anton looked around for a pair of gloves.

“No need for gloves. It’s ready-analysed,” said Ellefsen.

A chessboard had been drawn on the brown cardboard box with a black marker pen. In the middle of the box, in bold white text, it said, “THE PEOPLE vs. THE POWERS.” The text on the back looked typed, but on closer inspection Anton saw that each letter had been done using a felt-tip pen and stencil.

Anton read out loud.

“ARE YOU MISSING YOUR PRIME MINISTER? Deliver the box by 09.00 Tuesday to the President of the Parliament's office. Further instructions are available on the tablet. The password is obvious.”

“Have you tried using *obvious*?” Anton asked.

“No. It’s a number code. But I’ve tried all the obvious number codes, like today’s date, 00000, 11111, 12345 ... ,” said Ellefsen.

“How long have you had the box?” Björk interrupted.

“I guess I’ve been fiddling with it for about an hour.”

“And I wasn’t informed until now because...?” Anton asked.

“Beats me. People were so jumpy after the bomb at Maihaugen, the guy on reception was freaking out. When bombs and uncertainty are involved, they always come to me. Besides it was when the shifts were changing...” said Ellefsen before extending his arm and glancing down at his Casio calculator-watch.

“Aren’t you cutting it a bit close if this box has to be delivered before nine?”

Anton and Björk looked at each other, and then at their own watches. Anton scooped up the tablet and box and rushed out the door with Björk, who shouted “thank you” over her shoulder.

They had almost reached the garage before Ellefsen managed to reply: “Oh, don't mention it.”

Parliament

The contrast between the office's elegant, herringbone parquet and Anton Block's heavy footwear was striking – in a positive way. Viktor found the military presence both reassuring and alarming. Block stood at ease with his eyes on the box he’d placed carefully on the meeting table upon entering. PST-chief Fure however looked slightly

uncomfortable, and it struck Viktor that he often forgot that Fure was Block's superior when both of them were present.

Prahner and Larsen stormed in without giving so much as a nod to Block's blonde-haired partner, who stood in the anteroom comforting the distraught Secretary of Parliament, Edvald Mowinckel. Lucky guy.

“What's happened?” exclaimed Prahner.

“Why are Delta here? And where's Kahn?” Larsen interrupted while closing the door.

Viktor spoke before either Block or Fure had time to answer.

“We have to do this in the right order. Prahner, a quick summary from the MP's meeting please!”

“Well, we went through the facts. I emphasised the need for confidentiality and the raised security level. The conservatives seemed to think we were debating, and mentioned my department's lack of funding, and I stressed that now's not the time for scoring political points. To conclude, I said there would be a new briefing the moment we get more information – by the end of the day at the latest,” said the Minister of Justice and Public Security.

“Thank you. As for Kahn, he's needed at Police HQ to coordinate the security of the royal family, and to help with the other work going on there.” Viktor waved his hand towards the palace to illustrate the area of responsibility and paused for effect, before continuing.

“The press conference went smoothly. Everyone present understood the gravity of the situation and gave us surprisingly little trouble,” said Viktor turning to the head of PST for support.

“Fløysland delivered. It seems like NRK got the link as well except they'd done some source checking so they were a bit slower on the trigger than TV-2.”

Viktor groaned silently at Fure's flippant wording, and instead directed everyone's attention to the elephant in the room: The SWAT guy with the box in front of him.

“OK, Block – briefly: The box and tablet.”

Block went over the timepoints and the security checks performed on the box. Then carefully read the text on the back, before lifting out the tablet.

“The tablet has a five-digit number code. That means 100,000 combinations. The code is supposedly obvious. We've tried combinations like 00000, 11111 and 12345, but it's clearly not obvious enough. Any suggestions?” he said, throwing the question to the others in the room.

“Could it be something to do with Astrup? His date of birth or social security number?” asked Prahner after a few seconds of silence.

Viktor stepped towards the meeting table. “Why is there a chess pattern on the box?”

Block looked at Viktor as though he had given him the winning numbers for Saturday's lottery.

“Of course, the numbers on the chess piece we found at Mosetertoppen.”

Anton then read the numbers out loud, and Viktor had barely entered them before their cellphones buzzed simultaneously from newly received text messages.

Viktor immediately grabbed his phone and read:

The great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it? Rev. 6,12–17

For a few seconds Prahner, Larsen and Fure just stared at their phones while Viktor crossed the room, plucked a Bible from the bookshelf, and flicked hastily to the end of the New Testament. He saw Block grab the tablet and type 6 1 2 1 7; it was good that at least one other person in the room could add two plus two without counting on their fingers.

“*The Book of Revelation*, chapter 6, verses 12 to 17. It’s about the apocalypse, the story of the end times – Armageddon.” Viktor realised how much he sounded like a dreary schoolmaster teaching his pupils about something frightening, but it seemed appropriate so he continued in the same tone: When I saw the Lamb open the sixth seal, I looked and saw a great earthquake. The sun turned as dark as sackcloth, and the moon became red as blood...”

But his voice cracked and his throat dried up before he could read any more. From the tablet in Anton's hand they also heard the same feminine robot-voice they’d heard on the TV-2 news an hour earlier, now reading out the same words as Viktor. Their voices merged into some kind of morbid duet, except that when Viktor stopped talking, the monotonous, androidy voice carried on. Block held up the tablet so that everyone could see the horrifying visual accompanying it.

The screen showed Prime Minister Astrup and his bodyguard Myhren in the same costumes and setting as before. Their condition didn’t seem to have changed.

... and the stars in the sky fell to earth, just like figs shaken loose by a windstorm.

A figure, wearing a white cape, gloves and hat, then appeared in front of the two kidnapped men. Viktor estimated the person to be over two meters tall, but something about its proportions seemed a little off. The figure's arms were strangely positioned on its thin body.

The sky was rolled up like a scroll, and all mountains and islands were moved from their places. The kings of the earth, its famous people, and its military leaders hid in caves or behind rocks on the mountains. They hid there together with the rich and the powerful and with all the slaves and free people.

For a moment the screen went black. A split second later the angle had changed, so that only the prime minister was now in the frame. His eyes were half-open, and his eyelids barely moved as though he was almost too exhausted to even blink. The white figure then reappeared and hung a chain around Astrup's neck with a digital timer the size of a small computer tablet dangling from it. The red numbers on the display showed "24:00:00." At the same time, the figure threaded a wire out of the timer and down Astrup's back. A close-up showed that the wire was connected to something that, even to an untrained eye, looked like a bomb.

And they called to the mountains and the rocks, Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?"

Then the white-clad figure pulled a black hood over the Prime Minister's head, and the picture froze.

The Oslo Tunnel

As usual, Glenn Rino Åvik was furious about all the diversions and roadworks in central Oslo. Many of the streets were closed, which meant he had to drive the Toten Transport container an extra loop downtown before turning onto Rosenkrantz gata. His destination, Oslo Nye Teater, was just 400 metres away. AC/DC's "Hells Bells" thundered out of the speakers, but had to go on pause for a phone call.

"Speaking!"

"Glenn Rino Åvik?" said a woman's voice.

"That's me!" said Glenn Rino, who always loved having a woman on the line.

"In a few seconds you will hear an explosion. At the same time the wheels on your trailer will lock."

Glenn Rino was thrown by the woman's strange tone. So much in fact that it took a while for the message to sink in. The trailer passed Stortingsgata where the wheels began to rumble on the cobbled street.

"Sorry, what did you say..."

A loud bang interrupted him, and the trailer stopped abruptly at Eidsvolls square, right in front of the Parliament building.

"Glenn Rino Åvik," continued the equally monotone voice. "There is a bomb in the container. Run."

Parliament

Through one of the three arched windows in the President of Parliament's office, Anton Block saw heavily armed policemen storming across Eidsvolls square towards a semitrailer that had stopped in Rosenkrantz gata. Running towards them was an overweight, clog-wearing truck driver, shouting hysterically what Block interpreted to be the word "bomb." He could also hear music, even with the windows closed. From the truck's open door the voice of AC/DC's vocalist screeched: *Hell's Bells, Satan s comin' to you.*

"Get away from the windows," Block said to the others before turning and walking quickly towards the door. He poked his head into the anteroom to get hold of Björk, who craned her neck to see the drama unfolding outside.

"Björk, three things! One, make sure that truck driver is questioned immediately. Two, make it crystal clear that Syver has to be in the bomb team, which I reckon has been announced already. Three, notify Delta that the alert level has been increased. Meet back here when you're done."

After delivering his message he turned round to find curiosity was now the dominant force within the crisis team.

"I said *away from the windows!*"

This time they did as they were told.

"Is there a safer room we can use?" asked Block.

"The old debating hall maybe. There's plenty of space, it's rarely used and it's in the middle of the building," said Larsen.

Block was about to evacuate them to a new room when the tablet made another noise.

The screen now displayed a chessboard. The voice repeated the previous message about how those in power had changed the rules of the game and so it was the people's duty to challenge those in power.

Three seconds break.

We the people, challenge the powers to a game of chess. The game will be played via this computer tablet. The people are playing white and will start the game. Each colour is allocated a maximum of 24 hours playing time, which makes 48 hours in total.

A large number 48 flashed on the screen.

There are four ways Black can lose the game: 1. If the black king is put in checkmate; 2. If Black runs out of time; 3. If the chess board is removed from the Parliament building; 4. If you get help from a computer. This should be a battle between humans, not machines. If Black loses, the prime minister dies.

The four points were written in red on the screen, and were then followed by a long slideshow featuring high-ranking Norwegian politicians and business leaders. Each portrait was visible for about a second, before moving to the next one.

Each black chess piece represents a specific person. The prime minister Torvald Astrup is the king. Tom Myhren the bodyguard is one of the pawns. You'll find out who the other pieces are once they are taken.

A short film clip then showed the black hoods being pulled over the heads of both Myhren and Astrup, before the on-screen image changed once again to show the chessboard.

The two rooks, two horses, two bishops, queen and king, represent the powers – each one a high-ranking Norwegian business or political leader.

Although the photos changed quickly, Anton recognised the directors of Norway's largest banks, a handful of business leaders and prominent financiers. In addition, all of the politicians at the table were featured.

When I take one of these pieces, I will immediately kill one of these leaders.

The picture on screen then showed a toppled king on a chessboard smeared with blood. It was simple but effective dramaturgy.

What the fuck's going on? Anton thought, unnerved like he'd never been through 30 years of active service. Terrorist attacks normally felt external, limited and tangible. But this was something quite different. An attack on the royal family, and the prime minister, and now a bomb threat right outside Parliament. The terrorist was on their phones, and was reaching into the very heart of Norwegian democracy through a computer tablet. Anton shook it off by glancing out the window before once again focussing on the screen.

The eight black pawns represent the protectors of those in power: The police, the courts, the military. When a pawn is taken, a judge, lawyer, police officer or soldier will be murdered.

Once again Secretary Mowinckel entered the room without knocking.

“Have you seen it? The film on TV-2 and NRK?” he said with a complexion as fresh as skimmed milk.

The media had obtained the same videos that everyone in Viktor's office had seen. Anton raised his hand to Mowinckel, signalling that they didn't want to miss a word of what was coming from the tablet. He simultaneously locked eyes with Viktor who seemed briefly panic stricken and then looked away.

What is at stake? The first and most obvious thing is the Prime Minister's life. If you win the game, the black king will survive and so will the Prime Minister. The second thing concerns what you can win back: The people's trust.

Although the voice seemed computer generated, it sounded like it was almost becoming more intense.

How you play, and what sacrifices you make, will show the people who you really are. Will you protect the symbol of Norwegian democracy and the values underpinning our society? Things that are greater than yourself. Or will you sacrifice Torvald Astrup, to save your own skin?

At that very moment there was an explosion. Anton span round and looked at the semitrailer in Rosenkrantz gata, and could barely comprehend what he saw. An explosive charge had blown out the sides of the container, which flopped like limbs at

right-angles to each other and revealed two glass cages on the loading platform – Myhren in one, Astrup in the other. Both men were chained to black, throne-like chairs, and wore hoods and silk costumes.

Good luck, said the monotonous voice from the tablet. All that remained on the screen was the chessboard and two chess clocks.

A modest ping indicated that a piece had been moved. White had started the game. Pawn from e2 to e4.

Black's clock started counting down.

24.00.00

23.59.59

23.59.58

The bomb-timer around Astrup's neck, in sync with the chess clock on the tablet, also started counting down. Anton glanced at his wristwatch. It showed 10.00 precisely.

Parliament

“We have to stop the bomb!” said Larsen, reaching out for the tablet.

“Wait!” Viktor said, almost shouting. Larsen's hand hovered over the tablet like an eagle about to dive on its prey.

“Viktor's right,” said Prahner, “we have to think this through.”

She peered at him over her orange frames, then sought eye contact with everyone in the room.

“We all have to agree. This crisis team has to find the most effective way of using the nation's resources to stop a terrorist attack on our country and Norwegian democracy. Right?”

Larsen nodded and carefully withdrew his hand. Block had taken a step back as if to underscore that he was a resource and not part of the team, while the PST-chief stared at the tablet. Prahner continued.

“We have a terrorist attempting to dictate to us. If we play the game, that will mean we're effectively negotiating. Does Norway negotiate with terrorists?”

Prahner's question went unanswered.

“Listen!”

Viktor pointed to the computer screen, which was still showing the news.

A TV-2 journalist was reporting from the Grand Hotel's rooftop bar "Eight" which offered a ring-side seat to the unfolding drama. The reporter brushed the blonde wisps of hair from her face as it was repeatedly caught by the breeze, and the camera kept shifting focus between her and the bomb-timer hanging around the Prime Minister's neck. On the right of the screen there was a chessboard showing that a white pawn had been moved.

After fumbling about with the remote control, Viktor turned on the sound just as the reporter addressed the news anchor in the studio.

"...we know there are members of the government and police representatives currently in the Parliament building, as well as the head of PST. But it's unclear who is actually making the decisions about the chess moves. Nothing has so far been done to stop the clock, and if that continues then Torvald Astrup has only..." she paused for effect as the cameraman quickly zoomed in on the bomb-timer then back to the reporter "...23 hours, 56 minutes and 30 seconds left to live."

The news anchor took over and referred viewers to powersvspeople.com, where the terrorist was broadcasting the chess game in real time to the outside world.

Viktor muted the sound on the TV and checked the website.

"It looks like the whole country, and no doubt the entire world, will soon be watching us play chess for the prime minister's life," he said.

"We have to fucking do something. We can't just stand here like petrified ... sheep," said Fure without specifying what he thought they should do.

"It might be interesting to move a piece and see if the terrorist follows the rules he set for the game," said Prahner.

"If we move a piece, everyone will see that we're taking action, fighting back. White can't take us right now, wherever it is we move. We'd at least be buying ourselves some time," said Larsen firmly and slowly, as though he had just revealed one of the universe's greatest secrets to them. "Viktor! You're supposedly the chess expert. Which piece should we move?"

Viktor didn't answer. There was too much happening, on too many fronts, and this was too serious. Whatever action they took now would have enormous consequences. A bead of sweat ran down his temple. It felt like everyone was looking at him, their stares boring holes into his nerve-wracked skin.

"Could you excuse me for a moment, I ... I just need to go to the bathroom."

He pretended not to see Block's scowling, and locked the toilet door behind him, cut two lines, splashed cold water on his face and stared into the mirror above the sink.

Two minutes after Clark Kent staggered into the cubicle – out flew Superman.

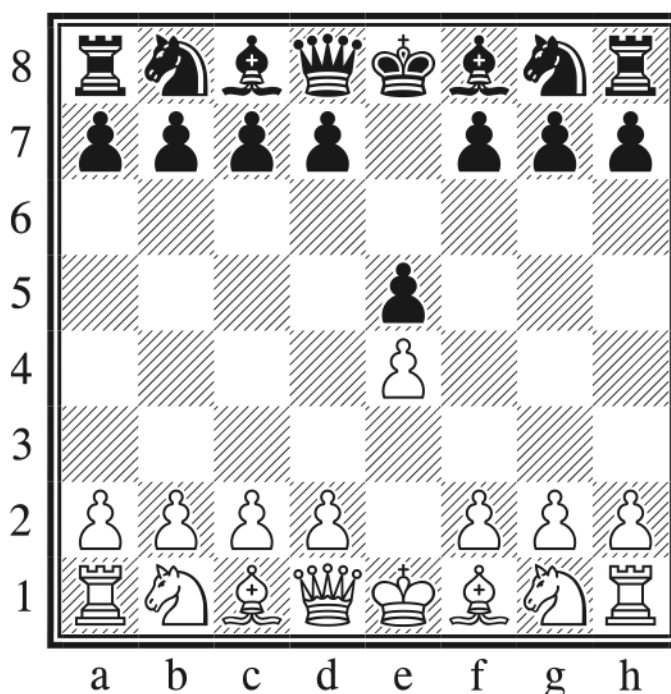
"Black pawn, e7 to e5!" he said loud and forcefully before grabbing the tablet.

“Anton Block. Delta have worked with hostage and terrorist situations before. Since our principal objective is to save the Prime Minister's life, are there any factors that might suggest that we should not move a piece?”

“The crux with any hostage situation is to take your time. Drag it out. Listen. In this case there is no dialogue, so far, only demands. So moving a piece at this stage would fall within the definition of buying time, by giving the hostage-taker something, preferably as insignificant as possible,” Anton replied, before continuing, “but there’s no concrete answer. All terrorist or hostage situations are vastly different.”

“OK, then we agree...” Viktor said while pointing a loaded index finger in the air, “...for king and country. Game on.”

Viktor placed his finger on the black pawn on e7, and moved it to e5.



The two pieces now stood alone in the middle of the board, like two envoys sent out to negotiate on behalf of their armies. And it looked like they might succeed; that there would be a temporary ceasefire.

Black's clock stopped. Everyone jumped up and looked out the window.

The clock on the timer hung around Astrup's neck had stopped as well.

They all sighed with relief.

Viktor clasped his trembling hands behind his back to prevent anyone noticing.

Parliament

There were two knocks on the door, and Viktor waved the blonde-haired Delta agent into the room.

“Any relevant news?” he asked in manner he hoped sounded like a blend of friendliness and military efficiency. “Ellefsen and the bomb squad are on site. We’ve cordoned off all the adjacent streets and are now trying to evacuate all the buildings overlooking the area. As yet there’s been no confirmation that the person sitting in the glass cage actually *is* Astrup, nor if the people in the glass cages are alive,” answered Björk efficiently.

Again, Viktor was struck by the absurdity of the whole situation.

He looked around at the nation's leaders, some of whom had their hands on the wheel and were used to steering the country safely and steadily ahead. They weren’t trained for this, no elected politician can prepare for such a thing; it was far from a normal day at work even for battle-hardened Block.

“If we’re done here I’ll go out and see what the bomb squad are doing before checking on the command centre at police HQ,” Block said, staring at him as if he had read his mind. “Fure has a direct line on an encrypted connection if any important developments occur with either us or you.”

Viktor nodded gratefully. Block then paused with his hand on the door handle.

“This is perhaps obvious, but I’ll say it anyway: We have to evacuate the building. This guy said he’s targeting top politicians, and has just detonated a bomb in front of the building. So only you, the members of the crisis team, and the secretary in the anteroom are permitted to be here from now on, in addition to any committee members you need for support. You’ll have to decide on a plan for the other members of parliament ASAP.”

Fure looked at Prahner and Viktor, who both nodded, and the door closed gently. The crisis team quickly discussed a plan for the evacuation. Prahner notified her state secretary to move all personnel, except the Justice Committee and parts of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, to the city’s government quarter. There were several existing sets of contingency plans, although none covered the combination of bomb threat, kidnapped Prime Minister and a chess-playing terrorist. But considering the circumstances Viktor was satisfied with how the plan had been adapted and so far implemented. So he sank into his chair at the end of the meeting table, and for a moment nobody said a word.

It was like they were sitting in a rollercoaster car, inching towards the very first drop, and got barely a minute's respite before a razor-sharp ping nudged them over the edge. They all lunged towards the tablet and saw that the Black clock had started counting down again.

As the others leaned back again helplessly, Viktor remained hunched over the tablet. He considered himself a highly competent chess player, had won a medal in a Norwegian youth tournament in the late 70s, and had extensive knowledge of the game's more than 1500-year history. So it wasn't surprising the move had touched a nerve. It was the opening move he had both hoped for, and also feared.

White pawn, f2 to f4.¹

The King's Gambit.

¹ Diagrams showing all the moves in the featured chess game can be found at the back of the book