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Published by Gyldendal Norsk Forlag 2018

Original title: Hvit armada

Foreign Rights:
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‘Russia is in Europe, but not of Europe.’

Tsar Nicholas I (1796-1855)

‘The breakup of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century’ President Vladimir Putin

In 1944, Russian soldiers liberated Kirkenes. 75 years later they are back ...

Prologue

Alexander ‘Sasha’ Ivanov woke up on a mattress so thin that he could feel the concrete floor through the foam. Someone, presumably Petrov, had put a blanket over him. The grey, military type, with stiff, prickly fibres.

Sasha cast his eye round the barrack which served as both office and day room for the janitors at the nickel plant. The stove in the corner had long gone out, and the couch next to the desk was empty apart from another, identical blanket. The collection of vodka and mixer bottles on the floor was, to put it mildly, impressive.

He reached for a half-empty bottle of Coke. The cold air made the blood vessels on his skin contract. Sasha drained the Coke in one, sank back and exhaled. His breath visible in the cold air. Only then did he discover that the window above the couch was ajar.

Bloody Petrov!

Sasha sat up, and immediately regretted it. A headache thundered behind his eyelids. His skull pounded to the rhythm of his galloping heartbeat. He considered a slug of vodka as a hair of the dog. Rejected the idea. His shift began at eight - in less than three hours. Better to sleep off the hangover. But first he had to shut the damn window.

The mercury in the thermometer outside the glass pane hovered around 31 below zero.

Not unusually cold for the middle of January in Nikel, but more than cold enough. Sasha

placed all his weight on the bottom of the frame, and finally managed to force the frozen window down towards the sill. He was about to crawl back under the blanket when he noticed something on the floor beside the mattress. With a groan, he picked up the key fob to the special production unit.

The foreman at the nickel plant had personally impressed on them the importance of checking the special unit twice during every shift, and logging the data from the instruments. Apparently, something to do with new environmental requirements. The janitors shared a key fob, and that was now in Sasha's hand.

Bloody Petrov!

String vest. Long Johns. Two pairs of socks. Woollen jumper. Snood. Heavy wadmal overcoat. Scooter boots. Lined leather gloves. Fur-lined hat with foldable ear flaps. Sasha was sweating before he had even finished getting dressed. He gave the vodka bottle another quizzical glance, but still managed to resist the temptation. Petrov had better have the coffee ready. Sasha opened the door and went outside.

The frost needled his face, burnt his eyeballs and glued his nostrils together. The snow in Nikel's streets sparkled under the glittering ribbon of stars. Around lunchtime, the eastern sky would attempt a grey, false dawn, before the stars returned. The dark months were Sasha's favourite time of year. The brittle but bright starlight made even a slag heap like Nikel look clean. At least as long as you stayed away from the plant on the hill; both the beating heart and the curse of the town. Which was where he was heading.

The nickel plant had already cost the lives of his father and his uncle Yuri, both of them from cancer and shattered respiratory passages, aged 45 and 51 respectively. At 29, Sasha had increasingly woken with a barking cough and the taste of sulphur on his tongue during the past year.

The rolling tobacco he smoked probably didn't help, but Sasha realised he had to get away from there or risk suffering the same fate as his father and Yuri. Preferably to the west. To Norway, or maybe Finland.

The opportunity had arisen just before Christmas, while Sasha was in Kirkenes. In a bar he had met a Norwegian who showed some interest in his job at the nickel plant. Before the end of the evening, the Norwegian had given Sasha an offer which was almost too good to be true. All Sasha had to do was to note down and send the Norwegian data from the instruments at the special production unit. In return, the Norwegian would after a while arrange for Sasha to be offered a job in Oslo, and thus the opportunity to travel to the Norwegian capital on a work visa.

‘What’s the information for?’ Sasha had asked him.

‘Nothing secret’, was the reply. ‘I work for a well-known Norwegian environmental organisation.’

Sasha trotted past the hotel and Berloga, the local bar where he and Petrov had had the first drink the night before. After the second shot, his mate had insisted on sharing his favourite tale with those who could be bothered to listen.

Petrov was convinced that the cosmonauts the Soviet Union were planning to send to the moon in the ‘60s and ‘70s had at first spent several weeks in Nikel, since the industry had provided the town with its very own moonscape. The cosmonauts had been messing around in the slag heaps and artificial hills made from coal in their space suits. Complete baloney of course, but Petrov had repeated this lie so often that a couple of the young guys in Berloga little by little had begun to believe it.

Petrov ...

Sasha felt a stab of guilt that he hadn’t told his friend about the agreement with the Norwegian. But secrecy had been one of the conditions. Nobody could know that Sasha was reading the instruments and sending the data to the Norwegian’s mobile phone.

He took a shortcut across an open space which every spring and autumn was transformed into a sea of mud. Ahead of him the four red and white-painted chimney stacks at the nickel plant pierced the sky. Greyish-yellow production halls and office buildings were interspersed between the factory chimneys, and the whole site was surrounded by pylons, like the perimeter wall of a prison camp.

Dirty yellow smoke poured constantly from the chimneys, and on still days it descended on the town and enveloped Nikel in a stinking, polluting cloud.

Petrov was not in the maintenance office. Sasha hovered outside the door, unsure what to do. If Petrov had already begun his main round of the factory area, he might not be back for another hour. There was another possibility: Petrov may have got the keys to the special unit from the foreman. His friend might have had to endure some bad language, but it would still have been better than going all the way back to the office building in 31 Blue.

The special production unit was a five minute walk from the maintenance office. Sasha passed the old Production Hall No. 2, a matchbox-shaped building where work had long since ceased. The special unit was across from No. 2, a curved metal construction with white roofing sheets. Sasha thought the building resembled an aircraft hangar.

The entrance door to the unit was ajar. A serious breach of security routine, but by no means the first time Petrov had been careless.

‘Petrov!’, Sasha called out, before reaching the door. ‘How sloppy can you get?’

Sasha opened the door and stepped into the antechamber of the production hall. From there, a steel door led deeper into the plant. A pane of toughened glass to the right of the door also gave a view into the hall.

Petrov sat on the floor beneath the window. He was looking straight at Sasha. Staring right through him. Petrov’s face was white, his lips blue, his head dangling to one side at an impossible angle.

‘Petrov?’

Sasha knelt down next to his friend and put a hand on his shoulder. The light touch caused Petrov to slide down onto the floor with his cheek facing the cold tiles and his legs pointing stiffly into space.

Sasha knew he should raise the alarm. Run to the foreman’s office; or quicker, use the wall-mounted telephone just inside the steel door to the production hall and call for help. But he remained motionless. Like Petrov he had frozen. Petrified in body and mind.

A crack from the interior of the production hall, audible through the window and steel door, reached Sasha. Made him get up. He was suddenly wary. With his back to the wall, Sasha moved sideways towards the window. He heard the sound again. It sounded like a hammer blow. He peered obliquely through the window.

The space on the other side was distorted by the thick glass. The figures were stretched, like in a funfair mirror. There were three of them, all wearing grey overalls. They had their backs to him, fastening something to the wall above the measuring instruments.

Sasha leant further forward. The distortion disappeared. The overalls were not the same as the ones used by the factory workers. The three wore grey military uniform, without insignia or any other identifying marks. The man in the middle also had a machine gun slung over his shoulder. Sasha fished out his phone and took a photo. As if the digital click had been audible on the other side of the thick glass, the man with the weapon swung around.

Sasha ducked so quickly that he slammed his knee against the wall. A hollow ‘thud’.. He stayed in a squatting position while slowly counting to ten, thankful that Petrov’s dead eyes were staring into the room and not at him. Who were these men? Petrov must have surprised them - and paid the price.

Sasha got to ten without any reaction from the other room. He resisted the temptation to look through the window to reassure himself that he hadn’t been detected. Instead he walked as quietly as his scooter boots allowed across the floor towards the entrance door.

‘Yup, thought I heard a sound from here.’ The man with the machine gun had appeared in the open door of the factory hall. He was wearing a white ski mask which completely covered his face, and held the firearm in his hand. His eyes were light brown, almost yellow.

A wolf, Sasha thought. The eyes of a wolf.

‘Please don’t shoot.’ It took a moment for Sasha to recognise the thin, pleading voice as his own. The man shook his head. ‘We don’t need to make a fuss. Come here.’ A crooked finger beckoned Sasha towards him. A commanding, strong gesture.

Sasha bowed his head. Mumbled ‘yes’ and took a step forward. He sensed a smile on the man’s face under the ski mask. Sasha took another step towards the man, drew breath, turned on his heel and raced towards the door.

‘Stoy!’

Sasha ignored the command, yanked the front door open and burst out. The cold immediately made his eyes water. It didn’t matter. He could have found his way back blindfolded.

Sparks were flying off the long wall of Production Hall No. 2. Sasha looked over his shoulder. Stared straight at the muzzle flash from the machine gun. Several bullets hit the wall in front of him, but there was no sound of gunfire. The man was using a silencer.

Sasha spun around the corner of No. 2. The lights were on in the building facing him. The night shift still had an hour to go, but even if he yelled at the top of his voice nobody would hear him over the racket from the factory.

The foreman’s office was his best hope of help. Petrov must have obtained the key to the special unit from there, so there was a pretty good chance somebody would be in the office.

Sasha ran past the maintenance office. The icy air burnt his lungs and the evening’s vodka threatened to make a return journey. How far behind was the man with the machine gun? Worried about losing momentum and scared of what he would see, Sasha didn’t look back.

The foreman and his staff were located in a greyish-white building at the end of an open garage site. Sasha passed trucks, snowploughs, trailers, an ambulance with a punctured front wheel and two tank trucks which were used for watering the roads when the summer wind and heat caused dust to envelop the factory, the people and the town.

He was only ten or fifteen metres away from the door of the building when something hit him at the top of his left shoulder. It felt like the punch from a fist. But the punch didn't stop. It carried on. Made him stagger sideways towards the garages.

Shot. I've been shot.

Sasha stumbled in between a condemned fire truck and an ancient orange Lada estate. He crouched down. Carried on further into the garage, and picked his way along the back wall in the direction he had come from.

'Little bird, where are you?' The man's voice was soft, hardly more than a whisper. Surrounded by concrete and metal, his words sounded hard. Sasha paused. Stood stock still. The numbness in his shoulder gave way to a rhythmic pounding which became more intense with every beat. Sasha swallowed to prevent a whimper escaping his lips.

A shadow appeared five vehicles away. Sasha slipped between a green army truck and an open trailer overloaded with damaged tyres. Should he attempt a sprint over to the foreman's office?

Wishful thinking. Every movement, each breath, was painful.

Boots on concrete. Measured, cautious steps. The man was coming towards him. Would soon discover him. Sasha crouched down. Crawled under the belly of the truck. His shoulder scraped against the diesel tank. Sasha bit hard into his thick mitten. Held his breath. Refused to let out the scream. Breathed a sigh of relief when he lowered himself onto his stomach under the truck and the pain subsided. He should be able to lie completely still for a couple of minutes.

The beam from a torch put paid to his relief. The man had predicted that someone might be hiding under the vehicles. He bent down and shone the torch under each one he passed.

Four vehicles away.

Three vehicles away.

Sasha couldn't take his eyes off the dancing beam. Hardly noticed the sleeve of his coat turning warm and wet.

Two vehicles away.

The next one was the trailer with the tyres. To Sasha's horror, the man turned into the space between the trailer and the truck.

'So is this where you are hiding little bird?'

Sasha folded his hands. Tried to pray. Failed to find the words. Jumped when something hit the floor only a metre away. A car tyre. The man was rooting around in the

trailer. Sasha could see his boots. Black military boots. The same type as those used in winter by the soldiers in the Russian security service, the FSB.

The man turned, his toe caps pointing directly at Sasha. The beam from his torch a full moon on the concrete. Sasha squeezed his eyes shut. The crackling of a radio transmitter followed by the man's voice. 'Da?'

'Ten minutes to go. Head to the meeting place immediately.'

'On my way,' grunted the man and walked out of the garage.

Sasha stayed where he was until the sound of the footsteps receded. Until he had stopped shaking. Then he crawled out from under the truck. The pounding in his shoulder had given way to a constant ache. Sasha placed his hand inside his coat to give his arm a rest. It helped. 'Ten minutes to go,' was what the radio voice had said. To what? Probably nothing good, thought Sasha, and began walking as fast as he could away from the factory. He passed the supervisor's office and continued down towards the open space he had crossed earlier.

He was about half way there when an explosion made the ground vibrate. Sasha turned just in time to see the tallest of the four chimney stacks smash into one of the production halls. The crash of the collapsed chimney was drowned out by three further explosions at the factory site, the last one so powerful that Sasha was knocked off his feet by the shock wave. He landed on his back and was struggling to get up when something hit the ground a metre away. A brick. Followed by an iron bar and parts of a swivel wheel.

Sasha bent double while debris from the explosion rained down around him. When the industrial shower eased off, he got to his feet and started running back in the direction of the town. The air had an acrid taste and stuck in his throat. The heat from the fire stung his neck.

The lights were gradually coming on in the apartment blocks ahead of him. Sasha passed an elderly man walking a dog. The man noticed neither Sasha nor the dog pulling on its lead. He was gaping open-mouthed at the destruction.

Sasha locked the door and tossed his coat aside. Tore off his jumper and shirt and looked at himself in the mirror. The bullet had hit him at the very top of the shoulder. Carved a three centimetre open groove. The wound was still bleeding, but not as much as he had feared.

In his medicine cabinet he found a dressing and began to wind the compress around the wound. Before he had finished, he heard the sound of the industrial siren. A drawn-out, undulating howl. 'Evacuate', was the warning transmitted to the citizens of Nikel. 'Run. Get the hell out of here.'

Sasha tightened the bandage around his shoulder. Decided to leave his heavy, felted coat behind and instead put on Petrov's slightly oversized padded jacket. He stuffed the half bottle of vodka in his pocket and walked out into the cold and the ever-growing crowd.

Part I – Fall Gelb

Chapter 1

‘Get a move on!’ Kjetil Brandt slapped the back of the head of the last soldier in the line with his open palm. The soldier, a solidly built woman from Finnmark, gave him an angry glare. Ida Vinterdal jotted down a few sentences on her notepad, and kept a few paces behind the seven-strong team who were now struggling up a snow-covered slope. Four of the six trainee soldiers carried a stretcher between them. On the stretcher was a wounded team member. Not for real, this was an exercise after all, but there was nothing unreal about the weight.

Kjetil, who had been appointed team leader for the current 24-hour period, followed just behind along with the Finnmark woman.

It was the second week of the trials for Group Alpha, the elite group of the Norwegian Armed Forces Special Ops Forces - FS - and half the candidates had already quit. This was as expected, and towards the end of the week half again would have thrown in the towel.

At the top of the bank one of the stretcher-carriers sank to his knees. Kjetil immediately went on the attack. A stream of abuse poured out of him, before he pulled the man to his feet and shook him. Ida noted how Kjetil constantly glanced in her direction, as if wanting confirmation of his actions.

Ida jotted down a couple of key words in her pad. Pressed the tip of her pencil so hard against the paper that it broke. ‘Get a grip, Vinterdal,’ she murmured to herself. ‘Find your inner calm.’

But the inner calm eluded Ida. She was annoyed with herself because of her failure to tell the senior officers that she already knew Kjetil Brandt.

They had met at Rena in 2014, and gone with the same contingent to Afghanistan the following year. At the time the Norwegian contribution was about to be scaled back, but after the terrorist attack on the Serena Hotel the need for troops to safeguard Norwegian embassy personnel and other ‘Norwegians of interest’ in Kabul had increased.

She and Kjetil had hit it off. They were in the same unit, but not the same platoon. Besides, the sex had not been anything other than a welcome relief. At least as far as she was

concerned. Ida was beginning to wonder whether she had got the wrong end of the stick when it came to Kjetil.

But so far he had been just as discreet as her. The relationship was never mentioned to any of the other soldiers. But Ida remembered how upset he was when she decided to go home after one tour, while he extended his stay with a further six months.

Talk about a fucking sliding doors moment, Ida thought. She was accepted to study Russian at the Armed Forces School of Intelligence and Security and graduated top of the class. Immediately afterwards she was encouraged to go in for the trials for the Special Forces. If Ida had known what she would go through, she probably wouldn't have applied. She didn't realise that voluntary self-torture was a thing. But she got through the trial period, and ended up in the newly established Alpha Group.

Kjetil returned to Norway with the *Armed Forces Medal for Heroic Deeds*. A skirmish in the embassy district in the centre was the reason he was considered for the award. The attack was triggered by two suicide bombers blowing themselves up on a busy train nearby. When the ambulance crews arrived, two more bombs were detonated, something which effectively put a stop to the rescue attempts.

One of the first aiders, a young medic, incredibly had survived the second attack. He crawled out of the burning ambulance and was ambling around the ruined vehicle while a group of Taliban soldiers began shooting at everything and everybody still moving within the area.

According to the report which Ida had read, Kjetil abandoned his own well-protected position and ran towards the square. In the exchange of fire which followed, he killed a Taliban soldier and wounded two more. The young doctor was hit by a bullet in the leg and collapsed. Kjetil hoisted the man onto his shoulders and carried him to safety.

The Ministry of Defence milked the story for all it was worth, and for the award ceremony which the Secretary of State for Defence personally decided should take place in Kabul, Norwegian journalists were flown down at the Ministry's expense. For a couple of weeks everybody wanted to know more about 'the Hero from Hedmark', and then the interest waned and cameras and microphones found other, short-lived celebrities to play with.

One month later, Kjetil returned to Norway with a medal in his pocket, and spent the next three years trying to find himself. At least trying to recover an earlier version of himself – since the Kjetil Ida now was observing in her role as trial officer at FS had changed. Physically he was a lot more powerful than she remembered him in Afghanistan, and even

then he was very fit. But something had also happened to his temperament. Kjetil appeared quick-tempered. Irritable. Arrogant.

She really ought to have told the senior officers that they had done more than just serve together in Kabul. Then she would never have ended up in this sticky situation ...?

At the top of the slope Ida instructed the team to pitch camp. It had just gone five in the morning, and in the training camp outside Rena, the chill factor of the eastern wind made it feel several degrees colder than on the thermometer. In these conditions, warm sweat quickly turned to ice. The team needed to build a shelter, melt snow and make tea from spruce branches. That amounted to breakfast, and none of the seven trainee soldiers expected anything else.

While the team worked together to erect a bivouac, Ida put herself at a distance to tidy up the notes she had written during the night manoeuvre. Amir or Cornelius would soon turn up to relieve her. Ida had for the moment forgotten which one. Before that she needed to decide what to do about Kjetil.

Constructing the lean-to, establishing a defensive position, and boiling the water were carried out like clockwork. The seven trainees on the team Ida was supervising were all experienced soldiers. Five of them, Kjetil included, had completed their training with the parachute regiment at Rena the previous year. The other two were marines, normally stationed at Ramsund naval base in Northern Norway.

Ida stuffed the notepad in her pocket and walked back towards the bivouac to tell them who would be taking over as team leader after Kjetil. The role of team leader was rotated, and Ida had decided that the time was right for the woman from Finnmark. A choice Kjetil would presumably not approve of. Ida didn't care. Unless he immediately got a grip, he was in any case out of there.

Six of the seven trainees were sitting under the lean-to, about to have a hot drink. Then a spot of firearm maintenance, and maybe some shuteye.

'Where's Brandt?', Ida asked.

'On first watch,' said the woman from Finnmark, and pointed in the direction of his position.

That Kjetil had volunteered for the first watch after a march lasting nearly twenty-two hours was positive. Ida wondered whether she had been a bit hard on him earlier. His rough manner might just as well have been an expression of care; an urge get everyone safely to the camp before cold and exhaustion turned to apathy.

The position the team had chosen was at the back of a V-shaped hollow. It was suitable both as a listening post and an initial defensive position. Kjetil was lying on a ground sheet with a Hekler & Koch 416, the standard firearm of the Norwegian armed forces, in front of him.

Ida cleared her throat. Kjetil jumped, and his hand shot into his pocket before he turned around.

‘I’ve selected a new team leader, so ...’. Ida paused. ‘What’s that in your mouth?’

Kjetil swallowed. Failed to reply.

‘Get up. Empty your pockets.’

‘Bloody hell, Ida,’ protested Kjetil.

‘For fuck’s sake ...?’

Kjetil looked at her stubbornly, before adding in a flat voice, ... lieutenant.’

‘Empty your pockets,’ Ida repeated.

Kjetil held her gaze for a split second, as if hoping she would change her mind. Then he emptied his jacket and trouser pockets onto the ground sheet.

In his left trouser pocket Kjetil had hidden three Snickers bars, and in his right jacket pocket an energy gel which was popular with long distance runners. Ida had to work hard to keep the rage she felt away from her face.

‘So you volunteer for the first watch just to sneak some extra food?’

‘Relax, Id ... lieutenant. This body needs nourishment to function. Besides, we both know this exercise is just a boot camp lark. There’s always food. Even in Afghanistan there was always enough. Don’t you remember?’

Don’t you remember.

Was he referring to food, or something else?

‘That’s not the point,’ Ida began, but didn’t continue. There was nothing to discuss. Nothing that needed an explanation. Smuggling extra food on the exercise was cheating, and cheating meant automatic exclusion from the trials.

‘Pack your things and meet at the Group Alpha commander’s office at 8.30 am tomorrow.’

‘You can’t be serious, Ida.’ Kjetil took a step towards her. Hesitated. Paused.

‘Ida,’ he pleaded.

She turned her back on him and went back the same way she had arrived. On the way down the hill she ran into Amir who had come to relieve her. Ida briefed him on what had happened.

'I'll raise it with the commander at eight o'clock,' she concluded.

'Hope the senior officers won't get cold feet,' said Amir.

'How do you mean?'

'Think of the headlines: War hero found wanting for the FS. Kicked out because of some trifle.'

'Cheating is not a trifle,' replied Ida angrily, and immediately regretted it. She knew she had a quick temper. 'Raging red', her mother called it. The army had taught her to manage it. But occasionally she lapsed, particularly when it concerned something personal.

Like Kjetil.

Amir raised both hands. 'I know. But the media will take a different view. I sometimes think the senior officers are more scared of negative headlines than they are of the enemy.'

Chapter 2

Second Secretary Gry Utvik at the Norwegian NATO delegation in Brussels absolutely got that the farewell reception for the Ukrainian military attaché did not have top priority. Presumably that was why Ambassador Paasche had asked her, and nobody else, to attend when the question arose at the morning meeting.

Gry didn't mind. Having recently completed the trainee programme of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, she assumed that junior diplomats from other delegations were given the same task. In other words, the reception was a good opportunity for making new contacts and networking. A couple of glasses of bubbly and a handful of canapes. It shouldn't take long. One hour max.

She was wrong.

Midnight had come and gone, and Gry still found herself in the awful bar that military attaché Bogdan Peskov had insisted they take a taxi to. And this, after they, as expected, had been served copious amounts of both finger food and vodka inside the Ukrainian delegation, situated in the Partnership for Peace Wing of the NATO headquarters outside Brussels.

The Swede, the Dane, both Brits and all the southern European allies had been savvy enough to decline the invitation when it was offered. Gry hesitated, because she didn't want to appear rude on Norway's behalf. Something which would cost her a humongous hangover the next day. That the Finn and the Frenchman, who were still holding the fort with her in the 24-hour bar in Rue de Lombard, would suffer the same consequences was a meagre consolation.

'A last drink, for the fatherland,' proclaimed Bogdan for the sixth or seventh time. The Frenchman vaguely shook his head, but stayed seated. The Finn stirred, and gave Bogdan the thumbs up.

Gry drained the glass of water in front of her on the table. 'One more drink,' she replied firmly. 'But then I have to go.'

'Of course, of course.' Bogdan waddled up to the bar and ordered a round of double vodka shots. Gry closed her eyes. Tried to steel herself for the imminent assault on her liver, kidneys and diplomatic protocol. She got it now; the Ambassador knew what she had coming to her when he asked her to attend the reception. This was an initiation. She wouldn't be surprised to find a large glass of water and a packet of paracetamol on the table by her seat at the morning meeting.

Bogdan placed the shot glasses in the centre of the table. He waited until Gry, the Finn and the Frenchman had helped themselves before picking up his own glass. Bogdan leant over the table, holding the glass between thumb and index finger. 'Crimea is Ukraine!' he proclaimed, threw his head back and poured the vodka down his throat. Gry attempted a similar manoeuvre, but only succeeded in downing about half of the tepid vodka. Her French colleague next to her mumbled something and collapsed on the sofa with vodka trickling down his chin. The Finn got up and staggered towards the toilets.

The Ukrainian glared disapprovingly at her half-empty vodka glass.

'This is how you do it.' He grabbed a fresh glass and emptied it in one.

So, that's his game, Gry thought. She fished the lemon slice from the empty water glass, bit into the pulp and downed a full shot.

'Go, Norway,' shouted Bogdan happily. 'You could teach your French colleague a thing or two.' The Frenchman replied with a muffled snore.

Bogdan sank back on the sofa with a vacant look on his face. He blinked slowly, but couldn't quite get her into focus. That last vodka appeared to have crept under his Slavic spirit defence.

'Crimea could have been avoided,' he mumbled. Gry wasn't sure whether he was talking to her or to himself. Bogdan put his hand in his pocket and fished out the cigarette case which Gry knew was empty. He had smoked the last two cigarettes during the five minutes it had taken them to walk from the taxi to the bar. Bogdan opened the case, peered sadly into the empty space and then upwards at Gry who shook her head apologetically.

'We should have listened to the Georgians' Bogdan continued, putting the cigarette case back in his pocket. 'The same thing happened to them in 2008.'

'You mean you ran out of fags then as well?' Gry giggled. Couldn't quite put her finger on what was so funny, just that it was.

'Putin,' slurred Bogdan, without taking any notice of her. 'That devil. The action in Crimea was planned a long time ago, and this time they came to gloat. Just like in Georgia.'

This statement from the Ukrainian caught the attention of the diplomat in Gry, which was slumbering somewhere behind the veil of vodka in her brain. 'What do you mean?' she asked.

Bogdan's head dropped to his chest. Actually, two heads. Gry had to close one eye to avoid seeing the military attaché in stereo. Time for bed.

She glanced around the bar. No sign of the Finn. Gry squeezed past the Frenchman without waking him. She hailed a taxi on the corner of Rue de Lombard and Rue de Midi. Spelt out her address to the driver and slipped him a 20 euro note.

While the taxi weaved its way towards the Matonge district, Gry opened her shoulder bag and took out her Moleskin pad. What was it Bogdan had said? Something to do with Putin and Georgia; or was it Crimea? She pressed the nib of her fountain pen against the creamy paper and tried to remember exactly what the military attaché had mumbled.

The taxi driver woke her outside her apartment. Gry was still holding the pen between her fingers, the notepad still empty.

Chapter 3

The clock on her bedside table showed 7.39 am. Ida turned off the alarm which was set for 7.40 am. Barely two hours' sleep. If it hadn't been for her meeting with the head of Group Alpha about Kjetil she could have slept till ten.

She showered quickly, pulled on her work uniform and gathered her shoulder-length blonde hair in a tight neck-bun. The figure staring back at her in the mirror looked fresher than Ida felt. Only the increasing dark circles around her grey-blue eyes revealed that she had been running on only a couple of hours' rest every night for the past seven days. There had to be some advantages in growing up on a dairy farm in the heart of Telemark.

Obviously, it was worse for the trainees. But in addition to selecting the best candidates, the role of the supervising officers was to ensure that the bone-tired soldiers did not put themselves or others in danger when hunger and lack of sleep dulled the senses.

Kjetil Brandt came out of the administration block just as Ida turned the corner. If he had turned around he would have seen her. Ida did not make herself known. She realised only too well what had happened: Kjetil had turned up half an hour early in order to make a complaint about her decision. Probably told them about their relationship in Afghanistan. Ida clenched her fist and banged it on the wall. Dry snow scattered from the coarse wooden boards. She should have called the commander of Group Alpha before going to bed.

'Get me a coffee,' was the response she got after knocking on his door. Ida poured two cups and spooned some sugar into her own. A poor substitute for breakfast, but calories were calories.

The commander of Group Alpha of the Special Forces, Major Frank Halvorsen, had his feet on the table and was looking out of the window. The view, two barracks either side of the parade ground, was not much to write home about. Halvorsen was still studying the area as if the urban landscape were a Rembrandt painting. Ida placed his cup on the table and remained standing. Halvorsen paid no attention to her or the coffee.

Above the bookshelf behind the desk hung a framed Group Alpha heraldic sign: the wolf and the dagger. Ida had been told that this was a first sketch, drawn by Halvorsen himself. In that case nothing much had been altered up to the final version. A little more stylistically consistent perhaps, and the wolf no longer had red eyes.

The bookshelf itself contained messy piles of regulatory documents, technical manuals and history books. The top shelf was the only one in some sense of order. It was reserved for biographies of Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Erwing Rommel, Albert Speer, Norman Schwarzkopf, Otto Skorzeny and Robert McNamara. Big names from some of the most dramatic epochs in world history. Ida also noticed a couple of first-hand accounts from soldiers who had fought in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and the Falklands. She thought it odd that Halvorsen, who clearly had more than an average interest in war history, rarely discussed the topic with other FS staff. The few times Ida had met him in the officers' mess he hadn't said much. Mostly he had listened to other people talking, downed a couple of glasses of wine and left early for the house where he lived alone a few hundred metres outside the camp entrance.

Halvorsen reached out and grabbed the handle on the cup without turning around. Ida took a sip of her own coffee and realised her mistake one second too late.

'For God's sake, Vinterdal!' Halvorsen banged the cup down so hard the coffee spilled over the side

'If I'd wanted a frappe or whatever the hipsters call that dishwater they sell I'd have called Grünerløkka direct.'

'Apologies, major.' Ida swapped the cups, and Halvorsen sipped his gently, nodded contentedly and began drumming his fingers on the desk. One of the yellow post-it notes on the computer screen got unstuck and fell to the floor. Nobody in the unit had ever seen Halvorsen use his computer, and his mobile was a Nokia 6310i.

'Superior battery capacity' was the reply every time he was asked why he didn't exchange it for a smartphone.

Halvorsen was thirty-seven, and looked youthful, but not young. His light blond hair had lost some of its lustre, but was thick and without a hint of grey or a receding hairline. The skin on his face was smooth, except for the crow's feet round the eyes and the lines around the corners of his mouth. His lips beneath the straight, slightly broad nose often looked as if they were about to stretch into a smile, but they rarely did.

Most notable were his blue eyes, flecked with yellow. They were the eyes of an older man. Like the other officers in Group Alpha, Ida was well aware of Halvorsen's special ops from the time he served in the army special command, FSK. Missions on Svalbard and in Afghanistan and Egypt, which for everyone apart from a tiny group would be withheld as top secret for many decades. Were these experiences genuinely reflected in his eyes? Or maybe simply that she knew what he and his brothers in arms had been through.

‘This Kjetil Brandt case ...’

Halvorsen swung his chair round until he was facing Ida. She focused on a point in the bookshelf above his head. Still noticed his quizzical gaze.

‘... it’s worrying,’ he said. ‘I had expected better.’

The reprimanding tone caused Ida to drop her shoulders slightly.

‘Apologies, major. I should have informed you earlier.’

‘Informed me earlier?’ Ida noted the surprise in Halvorsen’s voice. ‘Are you a mind-reader, Vinterdal?’

‘I don’t understand?’

‘You didn’t know that Kjetil Brandt had brought his own supplies before you caught him red-handed?’

‘Er, no, Major.’

‘Very well. Do sit down, Vinterdal.’

Ida sat down on the simple wooden chair in front of the desk.

‘Or were you referring to the relationship you and Kjetil had in Afghanistan?’ There was a change in Halvorsen’s voice. It became neutral. Impossible to read.

Ida’s face flushed. Sweat trickled down her neck. So bloody unprofessional. She had been trained to prevent such bodily reactions. Still, she blushed like a schoolgirl on a first date.

‘How ...?’

‘Really, Vinterdal? You are a member of Norway’s top military unit. You know the resources we have at our disposal. You’re aware of FS co-operation with the intelligence service, PST and NSM. And still you ask me how we have managed to pick up a piece of shoddy gossip from the field?’

‘So it wasn’t Sergeant Brandt who told you?’

Halvorsen took another sip of his coffee. Made a face and pushed the cup out of reach on the table. ‘Oh, yes. He really laid it on. Claimed your judgement was impaired because he dumped you, and you have since wanted him back. He described you as something approaching a stalker.’

‘It’s a lie!’

‘Sit down, Vinterdal.’

Only then did Ida realise she had risen from the chair.

‘I couldn’t care less what you and Brandt got up to in Afghanistan five years ago,’ Halvorsen continued. ‘Nor was it hard to see that he lied to me when he was talking about

your relationship. Body language, tone of voice, lack of eye contact. The lies were so obvious that it was almost embarrassing. That is what worries me.'

'Major?' Ida couldn't quite follow the thread of his reasoning. It felt as if she and Halvorsen were having parallel, and only occasionally overlapping, conversations.

'As you know, prior to the trials for Group Alpha all the candidates are interviewed by at least two psychologists. That is also the case for those who are already serving in the Special Command or the Marine Hunters. In addition there are a multitude of tests, personality, association, empathy, IQ, EQ and goodness knows what else. That a chap like Kjetil Brandt managed to sneak through all this is worrying. Makes me wonder if we already have a few loose cannons in Alpha.'

Loose cannons.

Ida considered her own short temper. Rejected the thought. She had control.

'So Kjetil will be thrown out of the trials?'

Halvorsen gave Ida a surprised look. 'Did you not think he would be?'

Ida thought of her chat with Amir earlier. 'I wasn't sure,' she admitted. 'Given that Brandt has a certain reputation.'

'Group Alpha is not the national cross-country team, Vinterdal. There is no free entry for either regional dialects or a brash personality.'

Halvorsen leant forward, caught the cup handle with his index finger and drank the rest of the coffee. 'Sergeant Kjetil Brandt will continue to be a part of the Parachute Hunter Command. He will never be a member of the Special Forces.'

Ida rose from the chair. 'Thank you for taking me seriously, major.'

'Not at all. Where do you think you are going?'

'Er, I thought we were done.'

Halvorsen shook his head. 'I didn't summon you to talk about a trifle like Kjetil Brandt.'

'Summon me?'

Halvorsen picked up his mobile, glanced at the screen and flung the Nokia irritably onto the table. 'Sorry, Vinterdal. It isn't the first time I write a message and forget to press the send button. But at least the Kjetil Brandt case was useful for something. It got you here.'

Halvorsen opened his desk drawer and took out a sheet of paper marked both "COPY" and "SECRET" in the top right-hand corner. He pushed the sheet in Ida's direction.

'Fall Gelb-3,'" it said in the middle of the sheet, followed by the word: Visor

‘Fall Gelb is German and means either *case* or *incident* yellow,’ Ida said. ‘What ‘Visor’ means, apart from being the face protection on a helmet, I don’t know.’

‘You should have read more military history,’ replied Halvorsen with a nod towards the bookshelf behind him.

‘Fall Gelb is the code word which the German High Command used to give the forces the green light to initiate the attack on France and the Benelux-countries.’

‘I presume the armed forces are not planning an assault on Berlin?’

‘The Norwegian armed forces couldn’t occupy Luxembourg if they tried,’ said Halvorsen drily.

He leaned back in his chair. ‘For us, the code word ‘Fall’ has four values which refer to Norwegian geography. ‘Gelb,’ means Finnmark. ‘Blau’ Troms, Nordland and Trøndelag. Weiss is western Norway and Agder, while Rot is the eastern part of southern Norway “Visor” is the code word for a Russian informant who works in the office of the Chief of Defence in Moscow. That’s all I know about the person in question.’

‘And the numbers after the hyphen?’ Ida asked.

‘An indicator of the degree of seriousness. Number 1 means “low”, 2 “medium” and 3 “high”.’

‘And this is not an exercise?’

Halvorsen shook his head. Ida felt a sense of relief surge through her body. As if none of this were real. That soon she would be lifted out of her chair and into the next dream.

‘So this Visor, our informant in Moscow, is warning that something serious is about to happen in Finnmark?’

Halvorsen nodded.

‘Do we know what the “serious” bit refers to and when it will happen?’

‘Intelligence are working on it, but so far we have no idea. There is no indication of a Russian troop build-up. But we do know how quickly the Russians can black out the northern border areas by disturbing both our GPS, radar and mobile communications. They demonstrated that fully in autumn 2017 when Russian electronic warfare units jammed Norwegian airspace, and for example prevented civilian helicopter ambulances and Widerøe from flying. This was repeated during the big NATO-exercise Trident Juncture in 2018.’

‘What do you want from me?’

Halvorsen took back the sheet of paper and inserted it in the shredder behind his desk. Over the grinding of the metal cutting shafts he said ‘I need eyes and ears on the ground up

north. Someone who understands the Russian military mindset, and who may spot what others fail to see.'

Halvorsen rose from the chair. Ida did the same. She reached as far as his chin.

'Your team will travel to Kirkenes today. In total secrecy. Only the liaison in the Police Security Service knows you are coming. He'll contact you when you get there. And Vinterdal...'

'Yes?'

'Travel in civilian clothes, but pack militarily. For all eventualities. Do we understand each other?'

'Yes, major. We do.'

Chapter 6

Infantryman and border guard, Lasse Brox, in the army referred to as a “border hunter”, pulled out his iPhone and swiped his thumb across the Messenger icon. No message from Renate. Not unexpected. It was half past five in the morning, and he had checked his mobile only ten minutes earlier.

Should he send her another message? If so it would be the fifth in a row without receiving a reply from her. Just before midnight, when he wrote the first two messages, she was online. She had read and ignored them. Why?

Lasse put the mobile back in his field trousers. Second Lieutenant Steen’s instruction was unequivocal: guards caught with their mobile in the watchtower at Bjørnsundhøyden, had it confiscated for a week. An empty threat. Nobody, not even Steen, was able to steal up the creaking staircase to the top of the tower at night without being heard.

Lasse put his hand in his pocket. Fiddled with the phone but didn’t pull it out. What was he thinking, really? He had met Renate while on leave in Tromsø a fortnight ago. She was a sociology student at the university there, but was originally from Sande. Lasse came from Drammen, and because Tromsø was pretty far north, this geographic coincidence seemed somehow significant.

On Sunday morning, when he left her student digs having spent the night on a mattress on the floor, he asked if she wanted to meet up again.

‘Yeah, sure,’ she said.

Over the next few days they had chatted a bit, but when Lasse tried to call her she didn’t pick up. And now she didn’t even offer a smiley in reply to his messages. He had to accept it – he had been ghosted.

A few seconds passed before Lasse registered the rumbling. It sounded like distant thunder, or like the breaking ice in the Pasvik river. The latter was completely out of the question. The ice broke in spring; a season which was still about thirty centigrade away.

He peered out of the window and registered a faint flicker through the freezing white haze which partly obscured the view between the observation tower and the Russian town of Nikel.

In weather like that the powerful binoculars mounted on a runner in the ceiling were not much use; but through the night-vision binoculars Lasse was able to see the glare of the

lights from the town itself, as well as the chimney stacks of the nickel plant a few kilometres into Russia.

‘Fuck!’

Lasse backed away from the binoculars and the sudden explosion of light in the lens. Red and green spots bloomed across his retina. Another peal of thunder rolled across the snow-covered Pasvik river. Louder this time. More penetrating. What was happening on the Russian side?

The bang jogged a memory in Lasse. Made him remember the old man who came to visit the border station of Bjørnsundhøyden the week after he had started his tour there. Second Lieutenant Steen had given the chap permission to go to the top of the tower; and afterwards, over a cup of coffee in the day room, the man had told him of his own experiences at the border station during the summer of 1968: ‘I was stationed at the Svanvik border station that year,’ he began. ‘On the 6th of June, the Russians turned up without warning on the other side of the river. Tanks. Artillery. Hundreds of soldiers.’ The hand holding the coffee cup shook. ‘I was on guard duty in the tower that morning and counted fourteen cannon barrels pointing straight at me. Our squad leader asked the senior officers for instructions, but nobody knew what was happening and the generals in Oslo were silent. Then the Russians started shooting.’

In order to emphasise the sentence, the old man had banged his palm so hard on the table that Lasse jumped. Judging from the facial expressions of the others, he wasn’t alone. The thing was, it wasn’t that hard to imagine the situation described by the old man. They had all been thinking along those lines.

‘I stared straight into the muzzle flashes and counted the seconds,’ he continued. ‘When I got to three, I realised that the Russians were using gunpowder. That was three bloody long seconds.’

Could the flashes of light and the loud booms in Nikel be the prelude to a Russian surprise manoeuvre like the one in 1968? Lasse picked up the phone receiver. He hesitated, with his finger hovering over the button which would wake Second Lieutenant Steen, then pressed it.

‘Yes?’ replied Steen almost at once.

‘Second lieutenant. I think you need to make your way over here. Things are happening on the other side of the border.’

‘Things, Brox?’

‘Loud bangs. Lights. I’m not sure how to ...’

The sudden siren warning from Nikel stole his words. At the other end of the line he heard Steen yell: 'On my way!'

All the soldiers at the Bjørnsundhøyden border station had been alerted and were putting on their uniforms and equipment, when Steen, closely followed by Sergeant Huuva, entered the observation chamber at the top of the 15-metre tower. The sirens on the other side of the river were still wailing. Rose and fell, as if the sound were being produced by a hand-driven crank and the operator was beginning to tire.

'An industrial alarm,' were Huuva's first words. 'I've heard it before, when I was little.' Huuva spoke Norwegian with the sing-song intonation typical of the Sámi people in Finnmark.

'Sounds about right,' said Lasse, and described the flashes of light and rumbling sound.

'You don't think it's an exercise?' Steen asked.

Huuva shook his head. 'Not under these conditions. It's thirty below out there. When the alarm goes off, people evacuate into the street and await further instructions from Industrial Safety.'

'The freezing fog is blocking a direct view,' said Steen. 'Have you tried the listening equipment?'

'I, er ...' Lasse wanted to slap himself on the forehead. How bloody amateurish of him. Without trying to explain it away, he passed the earphones to Second Lieutenant Steen.

The sensor was an advanced type, and became standard equipment in the watchtowers when Norway's inclusion in Schengen made the Russian border the furthest edge of the EU. The microphone could be directed towards a limited area or cover a whole sector. Various filters eliminated normal sounds in the area, like the rustle of the wind in the trees, or birdsong.

Second Lieutenant Steen stood and listened with a growing frown in the middle of the forehead. She passed the earphones to Sergeant Huuva.

'What do you reckon it is?' she asked.

Huuva put on the headset and cocked his head while he peered out of the window towards the diffuse lights in the freezing fog 'They are footsteps,' he said in the end.

'Lots of footsteps. As if a large unit is on the march.'

Chapter 24

Ida took the stairs to the ground floor two at a time, continued through the living room and up to the first floor. Cornelius, Amir and Monrad followed her, while Matti remained in the basement to wait for the message, which they were receiving in chunks of a tenth of a second, to download.

‘I can see them.’ Amir peered through the crack in the curtain in what had to be Matti’s bedroom. A typical boy’s room, Ida thought. A narrow bed, a desk and a bookshelf – all in 1970s beige.

‘How many?’

‘Three of them. Dressed like the thugs at the police station.’ Ida went up to Amir. Monrad on tiptoe between them. The Russians had stopped at the gate to the drive. They had a brief conversation before two of them walked towards the house while the third remained standing.

‘What do you reckon will happen if we don’t open the door?’ asked Cornelius. ‘It’s pretty secure.’

‘They’ll kick it down in thirty seconds if they want to,’ Monrad replied.

‘And we need at least another five minutes to be sure the whole message is downloaded,’ added Ida. ‘Then we can sneak out the back door with Matti.’

‘No way. I’m so fucking fed up with being messed around in my home town. The police are still in charge in Kirkenes.’ Monrad’s mood swing had been swift. Or maybe he had simply been reigning it in until now? thought Ida. What had happened outside the police station must have made an even bigger impression on him than on her. It was after all colleagues and friends who had been threatened. And now the Russians were at it again.

‘Five minutes until we have received the message?’

Ida nodded.

‘Cover me from here. I’ll make sure we have the time we need.’ Before Ida had time to reply, Monrad walked back down the stairs to the ground floor.

‘Should I go with him?’ asked Cornelius.

Ida thought for a second before she replied. ‘Yes, but stay out of the sight of the Russians.’

‘Right.’ Cornelius drew the pistol and followed Monrad without as much as a creak being emitted from the old staircase.

Through the bedroom window Ida looked straight down at the two Russians. From the floor below came the sound of a sliding bolt being released before the deadbolt was turned. The door swung open, and the two Russians took a step back. Monrad stepped onto the outside landing and placed himself in front of them with his arms folded across his chest.

‘This is private property,’ he said in Russian.

‘Are you the owner of that mast?’ asked one of the Russians in surprisingly good Norwegian. The man did not appear in the slightest surprised to be addressed by Monrad in their native language.

‘That’s a bad sign,’ mumbled Ida.

‘The fact that he speaks Norwegian?’ Amir asked.

‘Yes. If they are Russian soldiers in disguise, we are definitely dealing with Spetsnaz. One of the units which is specially trained for assignments in Norway.’

‘Or he is one of the permanently settled Russians,’ suggested Amir.

‘I wish.’

On the stairs below, Monrad was shaking his head irritably. He switched to Norwegian. ‘What gives you the right to come here and start asking me questions? This is private property. You are not welcome here.’

‘Are you the owner of the mast?’ the Russians repeated, in the same, calm voice.

Monrad unzipped his jacket and pulled out his police ID which was hanging round his neck. ‘I am ordering you to leave the area. If not, I will have to arrest you.’

‘For the third and last time,’ continued the Russian, unfazed by both the ID and the threat, ‘are you the owner of the mast?’

‘You speak Norwegian, but there is something wrong with your comprehension of the language.’ Monrad took a step towards the two Russians. Paused on the edge of the landing. ‘Leave the property now, or I will summon reinforcements.’ Monrad unzipped his jacket completely, exposing the belt with a walkie talkie and a gun.

‘The system’s down,’ said the Russian. ‘And you have no time to draw your gun.’ He nodded to his colleague who made a swift movement with his left arm.

From her position by the window, Ida was unable to see exactly what was happening since Monrad was blocking her view. But the outcome was dramatic. Monrad clutched his side and remained standing with his back bent until his knees gave way and he fell forward.

As if this were an everyday occurrence, the two Russians both took a step to the side and allowed the body to fall past them and down the stairs. It was not until Monrad was lying

motionless on the drive that Ida spotted the knife in the Russian's hand. It was long and thin, almost like a scratch awl.

Ida drew the pistol and released the safety catch with her thumb. 'Cover Cornelius,' she ordered Amir, in a voice she had to fight to keep calm. 'I'll take up position here.'

The Russian with the knife paused on the landing. Hesitated for a couple of seconds in front of the open door. Ida held her breath. Registered how quickly the snow around Monrad was turning red. How both seconds and life blood were running out far too quickly.

Beneath her the Russian with the knife entered the house.

Two cracks sounded from Cornelius's pistol. The Russian backed out of the door while rubbing his chest with the now empty knife hand. He looked confused rather than injured.

They are wearing bullet proof vests, Ida had time to think, before yet another shot was fired from the pistol of the Norwegian special soldier.

Cornelius had drawn the same conclusion. The third bullet hit the Russian just above the root of the nose and tore off half of the back of his head on its way out. Blood and grey slivers of cerebral matter showered down on his partner. The Norwegian-speaking Russian dived for cover behind the staircase.

Ida smashed the lower window pane and fired four shots. Plaster and brick dust rose from the steps. She couldn't see the Russian, but he couldn't possibly have a lot of room to move where he was lying.

'He's sought cover on the other side of the stairs,' she called out over her shoulder. 'I'll make sure he stays down while you get out on the landing.'

'Copy!' Amir confirmed. 'What's number three up to?'

Amir's question saved Ida. In the chaos she had completely forgotten about the third man. As Ida was looking towards the gate, the third Russian opened his coat and pulled out a compact PP-2000 submachine gun with an extra long barrel.

'Cover!' Ida yelled the warning while throwing herself to the ground. From the outside they could hear an intense crackling, like twenty serially-connected firecrackers going off. The glass in the bedroom window exploded inwards. Shards of glass and wooden splinters hailed down on Ida, while shots hit the ceiling and the upper wall behind her. From the floor below her, Cornelius and Amir were returning fire. They were still inside the house and presumably unable to see the Russians, but now was the time to regain the initiative.

Ida crawled on her hands and knees over to the wall by the window, stuck the pistol out of the broken window and blindly emptied the rest of the magazine onto the stairs and the snow-covered lawn below her.

She swapped the magazine. Waited. Listened. The sound of the firearm boomed in her ears, then slowly gave way to a heavy silence. Ida positioned herself next to the window and peered obliquely out.

With the exception of Monrad's lifeless body, the stairs and area in front of the house were empty. The only trace of the Russian Cornelius had shot was a blood-stained hollow in the snow.

'They've withdrawn,' she called to the other two. 'Get Monrad in the house, I'll cover you from here.' Ida stayed where she was until Amir had hoisted Monrad onto his shoulders in a fireman's lift, then ran down the stairs to the ground floor.

Monrad lay on the kitchen floor. Cornelius knelt beside him. 'It wouldn't have made any difference if we had managed to get to him straight away,' he said to Ida, and pointed to the knife wound on his left side. 'Straight through the stomach and into the lower part of the lungs. Judging from the blood loss the knife severed the main artery in the abdomen. He was dead in a couple of minutes. The fucking Russian knew exactly what he was doing.'

Ida supported herself against the wall. Felt sick. She shouldn't have let Monrad go outside on his own. She should have sent Cornelius with him. If only she ...

Self-pitying bollocks!

No use thinking like that.

The door behind them creaked. Ida turned around and saw Matti's wide-open eyes before he ran to the sink and threw up.

'Is he dead?' Matti's voice was hollow from the bottom of the basin.

'Yes,' replied Ida sharply. Didn't give him the opportunity to ask any more questions.

'Did you manage to download the message?' She didn't much like the stern tone of her own voice. But she had to concentrate on the here and now.

Matti splashed his face with water from the tap. Put his hand in his back pocket and gave her two sheets of paper without looking directly at Ida or the body on the floor.

She scanned the message quickly. Noted that it was signed by Colonel Vinge personally. She passed the sheets on to Cornelius and turned towards Matti. 'Do you have a car we can borrow?'

'An old Volvo estate. It's parked behind the house. The keys are in the ignition.'

'Thanks. You're not safe here. Is there somewhere else you can stay?'

Matti gave it some thought. 'Yes,' he mumbled. 'One of my dad's friends from the radio amateur period.'

'Go straight there.'

Matti nodded. Went out into the hallway and pulled on his shoes and winter coat. Poked his head through the kitchen door. 'About the car,'

'What?'

'I haven't paid the insurance for a couple of years.'

The Volvo started at the first attempt. Amir was in the driving seat. Ida climbed in beside him, with Cornelius in the back. 'Before we head off to find Alexander Ivanov we have to drive to the hotel and pick up our equipment,' she told them.

'Let's hope the Russians don't get there first,' said Cornelius. Ida turned around. Cornelius was pale. The gravity of what he had been part of, the fact that he had shot another human being, was probably beginning to dawn on him.

'I doubt they will,' replied Ida. 'If the Russians had known about us, they would have hit the hotel at the same time as the police station.'

'Agreed', said Amir. 'But just the thought that they might have run off with our weapons makes me feel sick.'

'Same here,' conceded Ida. 'The Russians have shown us how far they are willing to go. We need heavier guns. The military command at GSV should also be informed of our mission. We need all the support we can get now that we know how far the Russians are willing to go.'

'Tricky without our own communications,' said Cornelius.

'There are many ways to communicate,' said Amir. 'I have an idea.'

Chapter 29

The nurses in the hospital foyer hardly reacted when the three armed soldiers came in through the main entrance. ‘Military district,’ thought Ida. Nobody here would bat an eyelid if you entered the local bank with a rifle on your shoulder.

Ida asked where they would find Alexander Ivanov, and was directed to the A&E reception where she eventually found the doctor on duty. The medic, a Dutchman called Günther, remembered Ivanov well.

‘Gunshot,’ he said, and tapped his own left shoulder with his index and middle fingers. ‘No doubt about that. I cleaned up the wound and sent him to one of the wards on the first floor. Room 203, if I remember rightly.’

‘Are there...’ Ida searched for the right word, ‘...any other Russians here, apart from those receiving treatment?’

‘Like those agitators we saw on TV? The ones demonstrating outside the monument?’

‘Like those, yes.’

Günther shrugged his shoulders. ‘I did notice a couple who were not patients, but for all I know they were family members. We don’t have the resources to control who’s coming and going.’

‘Thanks for your help.’ Ida turned around to leave.

‘This Ivanov,’ said the doctor. ‘Is he in some kind of trouble?’

‘Not if we find him first.’

Sasha pushed open the door at the top of the landing and paused. The dark corridor stretched ahead of him. A river of faintly gleaming linoleum. Which floor was this? Sasha took a step back. There was a “2” on the door. This part of the hospital appeared not to be in use. He would be able to hide there till dawn.

His plan proved to be more difficult to pull off than expected. All the doors were locked. Not until he got to a fire door which partitioned the corridor, and which was also locked, did he have a stroke of luck. There was a narrow door to the left of the fire door which he could open. Sasha slipped inside and shut the door behind him.

His hideout wasn't much to write home about. His lighter lit up shelves with rolls of paper towels, cleaning fluids, and at the far end of the room a trolley of the type used by cleaners.

A broom cupboard. Without windows or any other way out.

Sasha soon grew restless. He was only able to use his lighter for a few seconds at a time before it got hot, and in the darkness he imagined the room shrinking. The walls pressing in on him.

This thought took root. Sasha found it difficult to breathe. He tried the lighter. Burnt his hand on the hot metal. Dropped it on the floor. Bent down to retrieve it. Banged his head on the trolley.

Christ. He couldn't stay in there. Sasha fumbled for the door handle. Found it and lurched into the corridor. Gulped down the cool air.

A few seconds passed before he spotted the figure. The person was standing by the door to the staircase. Immobile. Was he imagining it? Sasha stepped back. Reached behind him for the handle on the fire door. Found it. Still locked - as if that were a surprise.

The figure took a step forward. Paused in the middle of the corridor. An outline, only marginally brighter than the darkness surrounding it.

Was he still undetected? Sasha couldn't believe it, but still hoped it was true.

Fire doors...

Surely it ought to be possible to open them manually? Sasha moved sideways along the double doors and across to the wall on the opposite side of the broom cupboard. Spotted the button on the wall before he reached it. Big and red. Mounted on the concrete at chest height. As soon as he pressed it and the fire door swung open, the person would be guaranteed to spot him.

But what was the alternative?

Sasha couldn't think of one.

He pressed the button.

The old boy wasn't really all there. Ida hardly had time to introduce herself before he began telling her about his life as a postman in Nikel. Endless tales of the habits of the local 'womenfolk' as he called them. Ida quickly lost the thread of the intrigues.

She picked up his notes on the bedside table. Registered his name. Sat down on the edge of the bed and took one of the old postman's hands in hers.

'Dear Mikhail Sergejevitsj Topov, I need your help.' Whether it was the contrived softness in her voice, or the touch which made the difference, Ida didn't know. But by now she had the man's full attention. 'With what, my dear?'

'Do you know where I might find Alexander Ivanov?'

'Little Sasha?' Mikhail thought for a moment. 'He was here just a short while ago. Was going to get me a coffee, but never came back. Simply disappeared. Just like that. Like Ivan, when the new Cheka-officer arrived in Nikel. Strange story.'

Mikhail's gaze wandered while he thought about this Ivan. Ida let go of his hand without him even noticing.

'The only way down to A&E and the main exit is the stairs we came up. That means Alexander is still at the hospital,' she said.

'Unless he jumped out of a window or found a back door,' Amir added.

'Possibly. In any case we'll have to quickly search the place from top to bottom to try and find him.'

They took the stairs to the third floor and were just entering the wide corridor when they heard the sound of breaking glass from the floor below.

'You'd think he'd overheard what I said,' mumbled Amir while they turned and ran back down the stairs.

The corridor on the second floor was just as dark as the one on the third. But Ida was still able to pick out movements at the other end of the passage, opposite an open fire door. She pulled the night vision glasses down over her eyes.

Two figures became clearly visible. The person furthest away was standing by a broken window. He appeared to be trying to pick off the glass fragments which were still stuck on the sill. The other, a man, judging from his build, was approaching the figure by the window with a rifle on his shoulder. He was wearing the same type of clothing as the Russian in the car outside the hospital.

'Amir?' whispered Ida.

'Two seconds,' replied the marksman. Then: 'Ready.'

'Put down the gun and raise your hands above your head,' Ida shouted in Russian.

The call made the man with the rifle freeze. Then he ducked, making his body turn 180 degrees, the weapon still on his shoulder. A supple, well-drilled movement which would have surprised Amir.

The night vision glasses were lit up by the muzzle flash. Ida heard the bullet smack into the wall behind her, after passing between her and Cornelius. Amir's rifle let out a hollow "poof"

The man twitched. He tried to get up. Only half managed it before his legs gave way and he collapsed and stayed down.

'Alexander,' Ida called in Russian while she ran towards him. 'We've come to rescue you.'

'How do I know you're Norwegian?' he retorted. Alexander walked backwards whilst talking. He ended up with his back against the door at the far end of the corridor.

Ida slowed down. Slung her rifle onto her back. Held her hands up in front of her. Skirted round the pool of blood on the floor by the dead Russian.

'I know you're scared. But you have to believe us. The message you sent to your contact in Bellona was passed on to us.'

This information seemed to calm Alexander down. His shoulders slumped. Ida thought she heard him whisper "Thank God", or something like that.

'Come with us. We've a car outside. Soon you'll be safe.'

Alexander took a step towards her. Didn't get any further before the door behind him swung open and an arm locked around his neck and dragged him backwards. Ida raised her rifle. Put her finger on the trigger. Only just managed to catch a glimpse of the attacker's pale eyes before the door banged shut. Only then was Ida aware of the object the man must have thrown into the room with his free hand. 'Grenade!'

Ida turned and ran. Took off, throwing herself flat on the floor. Heard Cornelius and Amir land on the floor a little in front of her.

Flash of light.

Loud crack

Shockwave.

Dazed, Ida turned around. The windows closest to the detonation spot had been blown out. The curtains fluttered through the broken windows in the morning breeze.

'Shock grenade,' Cornelius stated - too loudly. 'No shrapnel. We were lucky.'

'He can't be allowed to escape with Alexander.' Ida struggled to her feet. Had to use the wall for support. The blast from the grenade had made her dizzy. Messed with her balance.

She gradually regained her equilibrium. Behind the door at the end of the corridor was yet another staircase. Somewhere down there a door slammed. Ida ran in front. Driven by the

urgency. But also realising she had to keep her cool. For all she knew there might be yet more Russians waiting for them further down.

Cornelius and Amir took up positions on either side of the door before Ida kicked it down. The door came loose from the frame and was left swinging on the top hinge. Ida registered the rear lights of an SUV which tore out of the car park towards the centre of town.

‘The Volvo!’ They broke into a run towards the copse behind the parking lot. Before she got there, Ida paused. Cornelius and Amir stopped next to her.

‘Completely wrecked,’ Cornelius groaned.

In frustration, Ida kicked the bumper. The windscreen on the Volvo was pulverised. She counted seven bullet holes in the bonnet. Whoever shot at it had stood in front of the car and fired off a whole magazine.

‘Just as well Mast-Matti hadn’t paid his insurance premium,” Cornelius said. ‘Pretty sure this sort of thing isn’t covered.’

‘Looks like we have visitors.’

Ida and Cornelius turned away from the disabled Volvo. Kneeling behind them, Amir was peering over the barrel of his gun. On the icy bay of Prestbukta, three snow scooters raced towards the hospital. One of them a little ahead of the others.

‘Norwegian uniforms,’ Ida stated.

‘The scooters are the same as those used by the Border Hunters,’ Amir confirmed.

The first snow scooter pulled up in front of them. The driver removed his helmet and pushed a hand through his short, thick hair. The three chevrons on his chest insignia identified him as a sergeant.

‘My name is Huuva,’ he said in Norwegian with a Sámi accent. ‘On the scooters behind me are Second Lieutenant Steen and Border Hunter Brox. Looks like you could do with some help.’

Chapter 32

‘Seems calm.’ BG stood beside Ailo, who was navigating towards a concrete quay fifty metres east of the Thon hotel. The town was dark, but several of the boats in the eastern harbour were lit up by lanterns and deck lights. The boats were pitching gently in the swell, like small, illuminated islands.

Earlier, when they passed the headland of Tømmerneset which gave them an unobstructed view of Kirkenes, Ailo had slowed the pace at Frank’s request. The RIB was low in the water. Unless someone was monitoring the arrivals at Kirkenes, there was a good chance they would stay undetected. The blackout didn’t just benefit the Russians.

BG lowered the binoculars and turned to Frank. ‘Doesn’t look as if there is anything happening on that part of the quay.’

‘I told you,’ interjected Ailo. ‘The water is shallower here than other places along the shore. It’s where the old fishing boats used to come in. These days the factory ships have taken over all the fisheries. Foreigners and southerners, mostly.’

‘You mean they’re both scumbags?’

Ailo gave Frank a look. ‘Smarter than you seem, aren’t you.’

Ailo turned the engine off and they drifted soundlessly towards the quay.

‘Mind your head,’ he warned, just as Frank realised he wasn’t going to pull up.

‘Are you ready? Ailo asked BG.

BG nodded, and scrambled to the bow

A few metres underneath the quay, the hull scraped against the bottom. BG braced his legs to reduce the impact, and secured the rope which Ailo had chucked at him in the old mooring ring embedded in the rock.

‘In 1944, just before Soviet soldiers drove the Germans out of the region, Wehrmacht began work on a series of fortifications. One of them was meant to be here. Right at the water’s edge. As you can see, they hardly got started. ‘

‘A torpedo battery,’ Gravdal suggested. ‘To protect the harbour.’

"Maybe." Ailo shrugged his shoulders. ‘They never completed it. With the construction of the new quay, what the Germans left behind just stayed where it was, and gradually the whole site was forgotten. By most people, anyway.’

Ailo pointed towards an opening in the dark rock. ‘They blasted out a tunnel in the rock which comes out at the end of the quay. From there, it’s just a few metres up to the road. At this time of day, you won’t be noticed by a single soul.’

They heaved off backpacks and firearms. ‘Thanks for your help,’ Frank said on behalf of all of them.

‘You’re welcome. We’ve got strong views when it comes to both southerners and the authorities. But both are better than Russian uniforms on Norwegian soil.’

The tunnel led exactly to the place Ailo had described, and from the road they could see the roof of the police station. A searchlight was trained on the building, and a group of four people could be seen passing the lower side of the building at regular intervals. The activity was as Colonel Vinge had described it, apart from one thing: now that a kind of dawn had crept over Kirkenes, more and more of the town’s inhabitants were appearing on the streets.

So far they kept their distance from the occupants, but Frank suspected it wouldn’t be long before the people gathered courage and confronted the Russians. They wouldn’t simply accept that someone had attempted to occupy? their town overnight.

How would the Russians react to such a provocation? Frank wasn’t sure. A secret report he had read about the Russian annexation of the Crimea had concluded that Putin didn’t take the decision to invade the Ukrainian territory until three days before it happened. An opportunistic move, which turned out to be a success. However, it had been a bigger gamble than many realised. The Russian soldiers who entered Ukraine had no clear orders on how to treat the civilian population. What would have happened if Ukrainian civilians had resisted? Would the Russian soldiers have opened fire?

Kirkenes was not Crimea. Not yet. But Frank didn’t see any reason to take chances. They had to act before the town’s inhabitants decided to express their displeasure more actively.

‘The only armed person is a chap on the roof of a pickup. A hunting rifle of some sort,’ Gravdal informed them, and put his binoculars back in his pocket. ‘Proper Mad Max.’

‘Will you deal with that?’ Frank asked.

‘Of course. What are the rules of combat?’

‘Non-lethal until further notice. Unless he opens fire.’

‘Roger. I’ll pop into the Thon hotel and talk to the manager. The roof terrace should be a good vantage point.’

‘Ready in ten?’

Gravdal nodded and headed towards the back door of the hotel.

BG and Frank got to the commercial building on the other side of the street opposite the police station without being seen. ‘What’s the plan?’ whispered BG.

‘Shock and awe,’ Frank replied, and pulled two stun grenades from his backpack. ‘First you lob two tear gas grenades. Then I’ll follow with these.’

‘Somebody will get hurt,’ BG pointed out.

‘I sincerely hope so,’ Frank replied. ‘They’ve deserved that much.’

They waited until the four-strong patrol had returned from circumnavigating the police station. In the meantime, two cars had stopped below the station. Their occupants joined the group of eight to ten people standing up by the church. It wouldn’t be long before someone plucked up the courage to approach the Russians. By then it would be too late to act in the way Frank was planning. The probability that someone would get injured would be too high.

The four people in the patrol went over to the other Russians who had gathered around the oil barrel where a fire was still burning brightly. With the exception of the man with the rifle on the roof of the car, the whole group was now bunched together.

Fragments of a heated discussion reached BG and Frank. Not distinct enough for them to follow, but the atmosphere was unmistakable. The Russians were nervy. Constantly looking over their shoulders in the direction of the growing crowd of civilians. Frank feared that they might suddenly do something crazy.

He donned his protective mask. BG did the same.

‘Let’s go’ he whispered. There was no going back.

BG pulled the pins on both gas grenades and ran towards the entrance drive to the police station. The man on the pickup spotted him as he was crossing the road. He picked up his rifle and aimed it at BG. At least he tried. He only half completed the movement before a projectile hit the body of the truck with an infernal crack. The kinetic energy of the bullet knocked the man backwards, so he flipped over the edge and landed on the tarmac, head first.

BG rolled the first gas grenade underneath the pickup. He threw the other half-way into the car park, between the pickup and the group of people. The loud crack of the shot had made all the Russians swing around. Goggle-eyed they tried to understand what had happened. Frank didn’t give them time. He pulled the pin on the first stun grenade, which set the striker spinning, and counted to ten before throwing the green-painted cylinder.

The grenade hit the ground just in front of the Russians who by now were on full alert. One of them reacted immediately the stun grenade landed on the ground. He ran towards it trying to kick the grenade away.

The Russian would have assumed he had more time. But since Frank delayed throwing the grenade, the fuse had time to burn down and set off the main charge just before the Russian could kick the cylinder. The blast from the detonation knocked him over into the group behind.

The oil drum toppled over on its side. The flames flared up and sent a torrent of embers skywards. Frank lobbed the second grenade at a couple of the Russians who were still standing. The blinding flash of the explosive cut through the burgeoning gas cloud like a gamma-ray burst.

The two special ops soldiers worked systematically. One by one they used cable ties to bind the hands of the unconscious and dazed Russians. Those not directly knocked out by the stun grenades had been immobilised by the gas. The symptoms were the same all around: glassy and streaming eyes, blood from the nose and ears, hawking and retching. As far as Frank could judge, four of the Russians had got away, one was seriously injured and one was dead.

The dead man was the one who had fallen off the pickup truck. His lifeless body was lying on the ground beneath the truck, his head turned at an impossible angle, his eyes wide open and vacant. Frank immediately understood there was nothing he could do for him. With help from BG they placed the body under the vehicle so that it wouldn't be easily visible to his friends.

The Russian who attempted to kick the stun grenade away was seriously injured, but he would live. The force from the grenade had twisted his foot completely round so that his leg from the knee down was pointing 180 degrees in the wrong direction. The man was unconscious, but it wouldn't be for long.

'Makes me feel sick just looking at it,' BG said.

'Let's show him some mercy.' Frank pulled out a morphine auto-injector and pressed it against the man's thigh. He depressed the plunger at the top of the syringe. The powerful spring was released with a metallic sound and the needle shot through his clothes and pierced the muscle. The Russian twitched, but didn't wake up.

'What a bloody mess.' Chief of Police Åsa Michalsen appeared in the now open door to the police station. Five uniformed, armed men ran past her and down the stairs. Along with BG they began erecting a barrier by the entrance to the station. Establishing a point from which they would be able to carry out a temporary checkpoint.?

Small clouds of tear gas were still drifting between the parked cars. But as soon as the gas dispersed, the pressure from frightened and curious Kirkenes-inhabitants would grow.

Half the town must have registered the bangs of the stun grenades and the gunfire explosions from Gravdal's heavy calibre sharpshooter

The chief of police beckoned Frank towards her. He meekly followed Michalsen into the police station.

In the foyer he took off his protective mask and pulled his hand through his sweaty hair. The action had not lasted long. Just over five minutes. Still his heart was galloping as after an uphill race.

'You didn't pull any punches,' commented Michalsen caustically.

Frank felt a wave of irritation. Really? Not so much as a 'thanks for your help.'

'Just be grateful that somebody ...' Frank could hear the harshness in his voice. Stopped himself before finishing the sentence with '...did the clearing-up for you'. He usually had better self-control. The last thing he needed was to provoke the chief of police. She was after all the one with the main responsibility in Kirkenes. The relationship between the special ops and the police was complicated.

'Grateful for what, Major?' Michalsen asked softly.

Frank did not take the bait. 'We were instructed to assist you,' he replied and added 'I was worried that the growing crowd of curious locals would make it difficult to hit the Russians. If it had been possible to deal with it earlier, I would have done.'

Michalsen nodded 'I understand. And we were told you were on your way. In the meantime, by a circuitous route, I've managed to gather practically all available police manpower in the district, including retired police inspectors. By lunchtime I should have mustered about 60.' The police chief went over to one of the windows and looked at the activity outside. Frank could see that Gravdal had returned from the Thon hotel. He had dismantled his rifle and was carrying it in a case on his back.

The chief of police continued talking to Frank's back. 'On top of the extra inspectors, Border Hunters have limited police authority because of the work they are doing on the border. With them I'll arrange a house-to house search and take back control of Kirkenes. It'll take 24 hours, but it can be done. But first we have to get the power and telecoms back up and running.'

'What about the refugees from Nikel?' Frank asked.

Michalsen turned away from the window. 'They'll be held in the school building until the action is completed and the situation in the town normalised. Then we'll begin the repatriation process across the border, whether the Russian authorities want it or not. They can't refuse to take back their own citizens.'

‘When does the action kick off?’

‘One o’clock. Before that, there’ll be a co-ordination meeting at GSV at twelve.’

Twelve o’clock. Frank checked his watch. Quarter past eight. A lot could happen in just under four hours.

‘I have to get a move-on,’ he said. ‘Lieutenant Vinterdal’s team has been given the job of arresting a Russian citizen who has valuable information. Apparently, he’s currently in the decommissioned hospital at Prestøya.’

‘We’ve received unconfirmed reports of shootings over there,’ Michalsen said.

‘Would this be your people again?’

Your people again. Was she deliberately provoking him? Or was he being overly sensitive? Frank didn’t reply. Walked towards the exit. Remembered something he had forgotten to ask her.

‘Is there a vehicle we can borrow?’

Michalsen shook her head. ‘We need every car we can get our hands on for the action at one o’clock. Will probably have to requisition some more ourselves. What about the pickup?’

‘What about it?’

‘The Russians won’t be needing it.’

‘Isn’t that ...’ Frank scratched the back of his neck, ‘... evidence?’

‘Technically speaking, yes. But you could call it a kind of self-defence.’

‘Good. We’ll take it.’

On the outside landing he paused and turned towards Michalsen.

‘One more thing.’

The chief of police looked up. The lines on her forehead might have been etched with a carving knife.

‘There’s a dead Russian under the pickup. Fatal fall, I presume.’

‘Fatal fall?’

Michalsen’s next question was drowned by the roar of jet engines. Three Norwegian fighter aircraft, two F-16s and one of the new F-35s sped in over the fjord and passed so low over Kirkenes that Frank was able to see the outline of the pilots in their cockpits. The rumbling boom swept through the streets and echoed through the low buildings. The F-35 waved with its wings and headed towards the border. The message was unequivocal: the Norwegian defence was not about to be dictated to by the Russians on its own territory.