From *Vengeance is Mine*

(*Hevnen tilhører meg*)

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‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been five months since my last confession.’

‘May God have mercy upon you, so that you may repent your sins and believe in His mercy.’

‘I thought it was about time I came.’

‘I hope you attend mass more often than you come to confession.’

‘Of course. Every week.’

‘Good. Now what’s on your mind, my son?’

‘I’m not really sure where to start… (pause)… Father, do you believe in just revenge?’

‘It depends what you mean by that.’

‘I’m thinking about people taking the law into their own hands. Punishing those they believe deserving of punishment.’

‘Are *you* planning on punishing someone?’

‘Me? No. But you’ve probably heard about the Norwegian businessman who was murdered? People believed he deserved to be punished, and so took the matter into their own hands.’

‘I heard about the video, yes. In which they elevate themselves to both prosecutor and judge.’

‘They have many supporters. People like to see the elite punished.

(Pause)

‘Violence often has an ethical dimension.’

‘What do you mean, Father?’

‘We often call such people immoral, but many of the most brutal and violent individuals and groups are motivated by ethical norms. Their own ethical norms.’

‘A kind of ethics of violence?’

‘Exactly. Immanuel Kant called it a categorical imperative. Or a moral imperative. That a person is obligated to follow a certain principle or morality. We see this in wars, too. The belief that one is fighting for the good, on the right side. Or in connection with honour killings, for example.’

‘Or in our own church, throughout history.’

‘Absolutely, my son. And when ethics change, so too changes our view of such acts. That which was once morally just, may today seem reprehensible.’

(Pause)

‘Do we have a duty to act? I seem to remember something about civil disobedience in the catechism.’

‘You are perhaps thinking of a quote from the Acts of the Apostles. “We must obey God rather than men”.’

‘Yes. Something like that.’

‘If we take this to its logical conclusion, one may of course be duty bound by one’s conscience to cease following the rules of society, if they are at odds with one’s ethics, basic human rights or the teachings of the gospel. Such as under a dictatorship. But in the case of this vigilante group, whose members have executed a citizen, we are far from “just revenge”. And regardless, God would have ultimately judged this person.’

‘These people clearly don’t believe in our God.’

‘A pity for them. But nevertheless, the Lord’s judgement will be the harshest of all.’

‘But of course people don’t see that. At least, not in this life.’

‘Ah, everyone is so concerned with this earthly life. What about the eternal life? Our time on earth is no more than a microscopic phase that lays the foundations for our lives in the Kingdom of Heaven.’

‘What if we, as individuals, have a duty to mete out punishment if our system fails to do so?’

‘But are you in possession of all the facts, my son?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘Then I think you should take care in how you judge.’

(Pause)

‘But was this all you wished to discuss, my son? Is there anything else on your mind?’

‘Well… there’s something more personal.’

‘In what way, my son?’

‘I used to worry about an important decision I had to make, but now I’m worried about its consequences.’

‘What kind of decision?’

‘I was with a girl… woman. Then I met someone else.’

‘Ahhh.’

‘Yes – I don’t want to go into the whole story. I’d rather not drag up the past.’

‘Then let’s focus on the present.’

‘Theresa and I had a kind of long-distance relationship. She wanted more than I was willing to give, and then I met someone new. Someone I was extremely attracted to. I had to choose.’

‘And?’

‘I put off making the decision, and was with both of them for a time.’

‘And now you regret this?’

‘Regret doesn’t come naturally to me.’

‘A guilty conscience, then?’

‘Not really. It should probably bother me that I don’t feel guilty in the slightest. But I put all the facts on the table with both of them. Most of the facts, at least.’

‘And so the problem is…?’

‘I made a decision. I chose one of them. And in doing so, several things fell into place. We intend to be together, and I feel that I’m ready for a new kind of commitment.’

‘But that’s a good thing, is it not?’

‘Yes, but also frightening. I haven’t… I haven’t always taken much care with other people’s feelings. And I’ve experienced how unfaithful people can be.’

‘And now you’re worried that this may happen in your new relationship, too?’

‘Yes. I’ve seen many marriages go to pieces, and those that survive still have huge cracks beneath the surface.’

‘My son, a marriage is based on a choice as much as it is on feeling. And it’s a choice that one makes over and over again.’

‘I’m fairly good at standing by my choices, Father.’

‘Good. Then you have nothing to fear.’

**26 February**

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Milo parked the car in a residential area full of large detached houses, and he and Kamilla walked the last kilometre to the research park. As they made their way along the cycle path, his mobile beeped. Theresa missed him, and wondered when he was planning on coming down to Rome:

*Caro! Ti manco! Quando vieni?*

He slowed to a stroll, and texted back that he didn’t know. That something had come up – something he needed to do first. She replied immediately: so you’ll come after you’ve finished whatever it is you need to do?

*Sì. Arrivo.*

He would come.

The large building connected to the University of Oslo housed several dozen start-up companies. In the open plan premises, groups of young men – as well as the occasional woman – sat at desks separated only by bookshelves. Each small group comprised a separate organisation; tech companies, mainly. But common to all of them was that they were paper millionaires – with the corresponding self-confidence to boot. They’d had an idea, and an investor had bitten and invested. As the majority owners, their assets would skyrocket – they could become multimillionaires if everything worked out. But they could just as easily end up on welfare if their product didn’t deliver and their investor couldn’t be convinced to throw more money their way.

‘This is just a bunch of little boys,’ said Kamilla.

Remedium Research & Technology was not located among the smallest start-ups. The company had already climbed several rungs up the ladder, and therefore occupied a larger area with dedicated meeting rooms in a separate wing. But this didn’t seem to have affected their informal style.

They were met by a managing director in worn jeans and a crumpled shirt, who introduced himself as Thomas Sefeldt. Entrepreneur and former doctor. He spoke as if his title of managing director wasn’t important in the slightest. More of a burden, really.

‘Is this about Harald Halvorsen? It’s absolutely insane.’

‘Yes. Do you have a meeting room available?’ Milo asked.

‘Yes, of course. Follow me.’

Remedium was among the largest individual investments Harald Halvorsen had made, and he had also acted as chairman of the company’s board. While he was a passive, minor owner in many listed companies, he was interested in Remedium beyond the stock exchange. Like Agari Tech, it was clearly a company on which Halvorsen had spent significant time.

They walked through the open plan office, past a dozen or so people sitting at keyboards and screens. Milo had read that Remedium worked within the area of health technology, but he wasn’t sure what that involved. They found a vacant meeting room and Sefeldt offered them coffee. Milo politely declined; Kamilla asked for hers black. Milo could see that she was studying Sefeldt.

‘We’re checking all Halvorsen’s connections, both professional and private. Since he was chairman of the board here, and a shareholder, it’s natural that we speak to you.’

Thomas Sefeldt looked pensive.

‘Of course. Let me just call my partner – our head of research,’ he said. ‘Hi, are you in the building?’ he asked into his mobile.

It was quiet for a few seconds.

‘Okay, can you come straight to meeting room two?’

Another pause.

‘The police.’

Yet another pause, in which Sefeldt met Milo’s gaze.

‘As soon as possible, yes.’

Sefeldt put down his phone.

‘She’s just on her way in.’

Milo nodded, taking out his notepad.

‘Perhaps you can start by telling me what it is you do? I know it’s something to do with health technology, but that could cover all kinds of things.’

‘Yes, of course. Well, for the most part, you might say that we work with machine learning. Or artificial intelligence,’ Sefeldt said.

Remedium had been established eighteen months earlier, based on a joint research project between the University of Oslo and Sintef in Trondheim. Initially, the organisation’s purpose had been to investigate how the use of algorithms might make a number of standard tasks in Norwegian health trusts more efficient.

‘But where does the artificial intelligence come in? An algorithm is just programming, correct?’

‘Yes – you’re absolutely right. The point is to automate processes. “If fracture, send referral to X-ray”. That sort of thing,’ Sefeldt explained.

But over the course of their research, they had discovered that the potential was far greater than first anticipated. Because what if it was possible to let the computer help to make the diagnoses, based on access to available data?

‘How?’ Milo asked.

‘Big data. The most common injuries and diseases follow the same patterns and have very similar symptoms. I’m a qualified doctor, and have experienced myself how a fairly high number of patients require relatively similar treatment.’

‘I thought individualised treatment was the thing?’

‘Of course. But that presumes that doctors have adequate time, doesn’t it? Something that often isn’t the case. These days, doctors spend sixty per cent of their time on paperwork and forty per cent on their patients. They’ve become secretaries. Expensive secretaries.’

‘And with machines helping to give diagnoses, this frees up time for the doctors,’ Milo said.

‘Exactly.’

The idea was that the system would be fed with data; based on millions of pieces of information, the machine would be able to suggest possible diagnoses. In turn, it would then be able to suggest relevant treatments.

‘So of course it’s up to the doctor to decide, but you get rid of the eternal irritation of filling out forms and other administrative work. A referral for a CT scan is ready just two minutes after examining the patient – instead of after twenty minutes spent fiddling around with handwritten notes,’ Sefeldt said.

Milo understood the logic, but not the link to Halvorsen. Kamilla beat him to it:

‘And this is what Harald Halvorsen was interested in?’

‘Yes, he came in on the investor side about…’

The door opened, and a dark-haired woman came in. She looked as if she could be somewhere in her late twenties or early thirties. Her hair was gathered into a ponytail, and her face was almost free of make-up. She was wearing jeans, and carrying a sports holdall over one shoulder. She was pretty, without being strikingly beautiful. Attractive, in a sporty sort of way.

Six months ago, Milo would have immediately found her attractive. Today, he concentrated on establishing the facts.

‘Thiril, great. I was just talking about what we do here,’ said Sefeldt.

He turned to Kamilla and Milo.

‘This is Thiril Davidsen. Our head of research – and leader of the research project I was just telling you about. We founded the company together.’

They shook hands.

‘Economic crimes unit?’

She slung her bag nonchalantly onto the floor and slumped down into a chair.

Her gaze was interrogative. She looked from Milo to Sefeldt, who simply nodded silently in Milo’s direction.

‘I’m assisting the Oslo Police District,’ Milo answered, before nodding to Kamilla, who took over.

‘It’s standard procedure that we go through all Halvorsen’s contacts.’

None of them wished to go into the brutal details of the murder. Instead, Kamilla turned straight to her list of questions. It was a matter of maintaining the upper hand. Of using the fact that Sefeldt and Davidsen had been caught off-guard, and were therefore unprepared for an interview. On more than one occasion, both Kamilla and Milo had experienced how witnesses who started out as the embodiment of goodwill itself could end up giving ever more limited answers. Especially after lawyers had entered the picture.

‘When did Halvorsen come onboard as an owner? And why?’ Kamilla asked.

The pair looked at each other.

‘It must have been just over a year ago,’ Sefeldt began.

‘Around fourteen months ago, yes, something like that,’ Davidsen said, nodding to Sefeldt, before continuing.

‘We were in the market for funding from new owners to finance a pilot project at Oslo University Hospital, and he was one of the individuals who invested funds.’

‘But how did you get in touch with him? This isn’t a type of investment he seems to have made very often,’ Milo said.

Davidsen shrugged.

‘To be totally honest, I don’t remember. That was more your area, Thomas. But I remember that he asked good questions. Got straight to the point. He seemed much smarter than many of the others we met.’

Thomas Sefeldt took over the speaking role.

‘It’s true that I was more active when it came to finding funding. We had a financial advisor who helped us to screen potential investors. I would sometimes hold preliminary meetings before I brought Thiril in. We wanted to make sure she could concentrate on the technology as much as possible,’ he explained.

The meeting with Harald Halvorsen had been arranged at the suggestion of the brokerage firm that was assisting them.

‘We were quite impressed by his experience. The fact that he had an international perspective and network that would be able to help us expand beyond Norway, and…’

‘Huh,’ interrupted Davidsen, ‘it sounds so calculating when you put it like that. Especially now that he’s dead.’

‘Relax – I understand what you’re getting at. He was a good investor for you, right?’ said Milo.

‘Exactly,’ Sefeldt answered.

The rest of the conversation progressed without providing any salient information. There had been no conflicts of any significance, other than the usual disagreements that might arise among the members of a board. After barely half an hour, Kamilla and Milo took their leave.

‘Let us know if there’s anything more we can do,’ said Sefeldt.

Thiril Davidsen also got up and shook Milo’s hand.

‘I’ve been thinking about his family. Do you think there’s anything we can do for them?’

‘I doubt it. Not if you don’t know them,’ Milo answered.

Both Sefeldt and Davidsen shook their heads.

‘Only by reputation. He spoke about them sometimes. I think he was quite proud of them, actually,’ Davidsen said.

Milo was taken aback for a moment, before she finished her sentence.

‘But he wasn’t really the type to say it out loud.’

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Kamilla finished off her coffee, crumpled the paper cup and dropped it down by her feet.

‘Sure, just throw it wherever you want – I don’t give a shit about what my car looks like,’ Milo said dryly.

‘Relax, I’ll take it with me when you drop me off.’

‘Just like you did that hotdog wrapper?’

Kamilla picked up the hotdog wrapper from the floor and stuffed it into the crumpled paper cup.

‘Look – I’m tidying up,’ she said.

‘Good. But don’t put yourself out too much.’

Kamilla turned her head and considered him.

‘Shit, you can be pretty cutting when you want to be, you know that?’

‘Thanks.’

‘But you’re cutting in a really bloody irreproachable way,’ she said.

Milo shrugged.

‘Is it the money that makes you not give a shit about what people say?’

Milo didn’t respond straight away. He braked for a red light.

‘I haven’t given it much thought. But I never really cared about what people thought of me before I knew I had money, either.’

They parked outside the offices of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage. They had called in advance, and Jo Betelstein was standing there waiting for them in reception. He was shorter than Kamilla, but there was a vehemence in his gaze.

When they were sitting in his office three minutes later, it was Betelstein who spoke first.

‘I’m assuming you’re wondering where I was on the night of the murder? Isn’t that the point of this kind of interview?’

Milo smiled.

‘This isn’t an interview – it’s a conversation,’ he said.

‘And we don’t usually get to that question until we’re nearing the end. But we can certainly get it out of the way first, if you like?’ supplied Kamilla.

Betelstein shifted his attention from Milo to her.

‘I was at a Holocaust conference in Paris. Got home late yesterday evening. Landed around eleven. That was when I heard about the murder. And saw the video. A friend told me about it.’

His sentences were hurled out, one after the other. Like a telegram. No superfluous words. No unnecessary subclauses.

‘And what did you think when you saw the murder?’

‘I didn’t see the murder. But I saw everything leading up to it. I heard what they said.’

‘And what did you think?’ Kamilla repeated.

‘That nobody deserves an end like that. Not even Harald Halvorsen.’

‘Not even him, you say. Does that mean you thought he deserved to be punished?’

Kamilla held his gaze, but Betelstein didn’t look away.

‘He should have made amends for his family’s misdeeds. That was what my mother and I were trying to straighten out. But of course he didn’t deserve to die.’

‘Did you ever meet him? Apart from during the court case?’ Milo asked.

‘Once.’

It was a few years before Betelstein and his mother had initiated legal proceedings. Jo and Ruth Betelstein had met Halvorsen at his office, where they presented him with all the documents in the case - papers that provided evidence of how their family company had been confiscated by the Germans, and then sold on to Eugene Halvorsen. At an extremely low price.

‘He listened politely. Offered us refreshments. But it was clear that he had already made up his mind,’ said Betelstein.

Halvorsen hadn’t been unsympathetic, but he had mentioned the principal of letting the courts decide. Betelstein straightened up in his chair.

‘And then he said: “This all happened so long ago.”’

He lifted his gaze again and looked at them.

‘As if an injustice pales with time. Becomes less important. When it can just as easily grow larger. At least for those against whom the injustice has been committed.’

When mother and son were walked out after the meeting, Ruth Betelstein had turned to face Halvorsen and folded up the sleeve of her blouse. She held up her lower arm to him, so that he could see the digits tattooed there.

“I was the only one who came home. I lost everyone. And everything,” she had said.

‘And what did Halvorsen say to that?’ Kamilla asked.

‘Nothing.’

Milo cast a glance at her notepad and saw the word ‘Tattoo’, circled there on the page.

‘Have you spoken to anyone else about this incident? Is there anyone who has asked you about it, or showed an interest?’ asked Milo.

‘It came up during the court case. Otherwise, it hasn’t been discussed. I haven’t spoken to anyone about it, at least.’

Kamilla glanced up from her notepad.

‘Is there anyone who has taken a particular interest in your family’s history? Anyone who has contacted you?’

Betelstein shook his head.

‘What about your mother? Might anyone have spoken to her?’

‘If they had, I would know about it. She wouldn’t have kept something like that to herself.’

‘Still, they knew the details of the case, and that your mother was a patient at precisely that nursing home?’

‘Was that question?’ asked Betelstein.

‘I can reformulate it, if you like?’ Kamilla said.

He sighed heavily.

‘Everything is accessible to those who have the knowledge and resources to go looking. Even though the case was held behind closed doors. And even though patient records are supposed to be confidential.’

He looked at them both.

‘These have to be people with fairly significant resources at their disposal. I don’t think we should be naive here.’

Milo nodded at him.

‘We have no plans to be naive,’ he answered.

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They sat in the car in silence. Sleet had begun to fall, large flakes of it hitting the windscreen.

Milo thought of Einar and Elisabeth Halvorsen. Einar hadn’t answered when he had called, and nor had he called him back. They had to talk. How had they reacted to the video? To everything that had been said about the origins of the family’s fortune? And how the media had jumped on the case?

Kamilla sat chewing a piece of chewing gum – but not with her mouth open this time. She flicked through the pages of her notepad. Made a few annotations with her pen.

Neither of them wanted to disturb the other. Nor did either of them wish to be disturbed.

Then Temoor called.

Reluctantly, Milo picked up.

‘How’s it going?’ asked Temoor over the loudspeaker.

‘We’ve just been to see Jo Betelstein.’

‘The Jew?’

It was a declaration of origin, a word that would easily set the piece in the puzzle. But somehow, it sounded brutal.

‘He’s of Jewish extraction, yes. The son of Ruth – the woman who died at the nursing home a few years ago.’

‘Right, right. Well they have a motive, at least,’ Temoor said.

‘Was that why you called?’

Temoor didn’t answer. He’d get to the point in his own good time.

‘Okay, let me try to summarise,’ he said, rattling off the facts:

A son who might have financial problems because he’d bungled some major investments. And who’d had a strained relationship with his murdered father.

A family history that went all the way back to the Second World War, and which could be linked to war profiteering and fraud.

A Norse group inspired by an ancient avenger, whose members believed the justice system had failed. And which was therefore exacting revenge on society’s behalf.

‘Am I missing anything?’ Temoor asked.

‘No, you seem to have a handle on the most of it,’ said Milo.

‘Well, let me just throw a fourth theory out there.’

The car was quiet. Kamilla and Milo glanced at each other.

‘Hello?’

Temoor’s voice broke the silence.

‘Go on,’ said Milo. ‘Keep going.’

‘Well, I’ve had a little look at everything that’s bubbling away on social media. It’s pretty heavy stuff.’

While systematically checking through the profiles that were stirring things up and justifying attacks on members of the elite, he had found that a great many of them were clearly fake.

‘We’re talking about bots here. Web robots,’ Temoor said.

Milo let this sink in. He glanced across at Kamilla, who stared back at him, her eyes questioning.

‘How many are we talking about?’ he asked.

‘Hundreds, at least,’ said Temoor. ‘And that means…’

He let the sentence hang unfinished in the air, as if to create a dramatic pause, when in reality he had probably just wanted to take a swig of his Red Bull.

‘… that we should take a look at who’s behind these bots. But there are also some of the usual suspects here. Or at least *one* usual suspect.’

Kamilla was still refusing to play along.

‘The Russians,’ Milo said, just as much to her as to Temoor.

‘Bingo,’ said the voice from the speaker.

‘But why?’ Milo asked.

‘My job is to find out *what*. Not *why*. That’s your job. I just thought I’d better let you know. I’ll send over the background material. I think it would be a good idea to find out who’s causing such a stir out there,’ Temoor said.

They were on their way down into the Operatunnelen tunnel.

‘I might get cut off, there’s bad reception. We can talk later, Temoor.’

‘Fine. But there’s just one more thing.’

‘Go ahead,’ said Milo.

‘They’ve made a hit list online, where people can nominate individuals they think deserve Váli’s wrath, or something like that.’

‘I see.’

‘Yup. And you’re on it, Milo.’

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www.deservedeath.com.

The website was already trending on Twitter. Around fifty names had been listed so far – most of them in Europe, but there were also a few in the United States. Milo Cavalli was number 39.

“Milo Cavalli, Norway, investigator with the National Authority for the Investigation and Prosecution of Economic and Environmental Crime. Son of leading financier Endre Torkildsen and Maria Cavalli. Grandson of real estate investor Antonio Cavalli, former member of the 'Ndrangheta Mafia in Calabria – one of the most brutal organisations in the world. The Cavalli fortune therefore stems from criminal activity that has destroyed the lives of many thousands of people over several decades. Milo Cavalli investigates financial crime in Norway, while he and his family are themselves financial criminals. Cavalli has secretly traded shares in violation of police regulations, and has also earned great sums through insider trading in the companies he has investigated. Corrupt Cavalli’s devastating acts must therefore be stopped.”

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Corrupt Cavalli.

‘This is no trivial matter, Milo. I think we need an extra coffee for this.’

Sørensen walked over to the coffeemaker. He didn’t bother to pour out the cold coffee at the bottom of his cup – instead, he topped it up with hot coffee, so that the liquid turned from cold to lukewarm. He took a greedy swig as he made his way back to his desk.

‘This creates a number of problems for us,’ he said.

‘For us?’

‘For you too, of course – but I also have to think of the investigation. Your impartiality.’

Milo looked dejectedly at Sørensen.

‘This is some fucking bullshit. But my impartiality isn’t exactly at the top of my list of worries. Harald Halvorsen has been executed and exposed. And now I might be next in line.’

Sørensen nodded gravely.

‘And of course we’re going to take that seriously. But once a seed of suspicion has been sown, we also have to respond to it.’

‘So I have to prove my innocence? Is that what you’re saying?’

Sørensen looked at him. It was obvious that he was weighing his words. He cleared his throat.

‘Being completely honest now, Milo. Are they going to find anything?’

Milo looked at him, irritated.

‘Of course not. This is bullshit.’

The chief investigator took another thirsty slurp of his coffee.

‘I had to ask. You know that.’

He took a brief pause before continuing.

‘There aren’t many of us who can take being scrutinised, our lives being gone through with a fine-toothed comb. We all have things that we’re not necessarily proud of, or that we should have done differently. Things that might look bad when put under a spotlight.’

Milo shook his head. The irritation was about to give way to obstinacy.

‘There’s nothing to find,’ he said.

Sørensen nodded calmly. Kamilla glanced at Milo. If it wasn’t quite concern that was there in her eyes, then it certainly wasn’t far off.

‘Let’s think rationally here for a moment. Exposing Milo as corrupt is one thing – and clearly nothing but an attempt to weaken the investigation. With his fortune, he’s the obvious target of the three of us,’ she said.

Neither Milo nor Sørensen protested.

‘But just as important is the fact that a hit list has been created, featuring a huge number of possible victims. Who are either targets of the Váli group, or who have now become targets of people inspired by these lunatics,’ Kamilla continued.

‘Europol is already on the case – I just found out. They’re being given access to what we have so far,’ said Sørensen.

But there was more. Although he was reluctant to pass the information on.

‘And then your boss called,’ he said.

Milo gave him a questioning look.

‘Isaksen. He’s taking you off the team. He’s clearly had a couple of journalists sniffing around.’

Sørensen didn’t seem surprised that Isaksen had waved the white flag at the first sign of trouble. Minimising the risk of media criticism was clearly more important than protecting a subordinate.

‘So that’s it? I’m out?’

‘For now.’

‘Oh for fuck’s sake,’ Kamilla snapped.

Sørensen massaged the bridge of his nose.

‘But that’s not what concerns me most. The worst thing here is that we have a threat made against a policeman.’

Sørensen had already been in touch with the Police Security Service in order to get their assessment of the situation. But for the moment it was deemed “highly probable that the threat was intended to sow fear”.

‘Of course, very few threats are ever followed up or constitute any real danger,’ said Sørensen.

‘“Of course”?! They just executed a guy!’

Kamilla threw her arms wide in frustration. Sørensen nodded to her.

‘I know. But we don’t know whether this is the same gang, or whether it’s just someone who’s jumped on the bandwagon. That’s one of the things we have to figure out,’ the chief investigator said.

Milo thought of Temoor. Of all the fake profiles online that were posting in support of the revenge killings. The suspicion that Russian forces were behind them. According to Sørensen, the Police Security Service had already started investigating who was behind the website www.deservedeath.com, but Milo had little confidence that they would figure that out any time soon. The only person in whom he had complete trust was Temoor.

‘So the bottom line is that a death threat has been made against me. We don’t know whether it’s real. And we don’t know who made it. But we know that it’s linked to an organisation with the resources to kidnap and execute a prominent financier. And with the resources and knowledge to systematically manipulate the Internet using bot profiles,’ Milo summarised.

‘Something like that,’ Sørensen said.

‘How reassuring.’

‘And that’s precisely why it would be a good idea for you to lie low, Milo. Until we know more.’

Milo didn’t answer.

‘Can you do that? Lie low?’ Sørensen asked.

Milo still didn’t respond. Sørensen sighed.

‘I thought as much.’

The room fell silent. Much had been said. Much remained unsaid.

Milo’s pulse continued to pound through his body. Nevertheless – or perhaps because of this – his thoughts returned to the murder investigation. He knew that he wouldn’t be able to let it lie. Despite being ordered to do so.

He tried to catch hold of a thought that had so far escaped him. It was something he’d seen. Or was it something he’d heard? He stared down at the tabletop, focusing on a chip in it. What had he heard and then forgotten? Suddenly the thought was there, and his mind grasped it covetously. It wasn’t something *he* had heard – it was something *someone else* had heard.

He abruptly got to his feet and both Kamilla and Sørensen started, as if woken from a slumber. Milo flipped up the screen of his laptop and opened the video clip of the execution. The first time he had watched it, the pure shock and horror had prevented him from taking in the details. Now he knew what he was looking for.

‘Look at this,’ he said, pointing at the screen.

He had fast-forwarded to the point at which the executioner came into view to stand close beside a terrified Halvorsen.

Sørensen squinted.

‘He’s bending down and checking the ropes,’ he said.

‘Not only that. Look at how close his head is to Halvorsen’s,’ said Milo.

Kamilla and Sørensen stared. Relieved at the fact that Milo no longer seemed about to explode in anger at everything that had just transpired.

‘He’s whispering something into his ear,’ Milo continued.

His finger left a solid, greasy fingerprint on the screen at the executioner’s mouth and Halvorsen’s ear.

‘So what’s he saying?’ asked Kamilla.

‘Impossible to hear,’ Milo said.

Sørensen straightened up.

‘You’re right. He says something, and Halvorsen reacts to it. Look at his eyes.’

Milo let the video play for a few more seconds, and now they clearly saw how Halvorsen turned his head towards the hooded man, just a fraction, as his eyes grew wide.

Was that surprise in Halvorsen’s gaze? Milo wondered.

What was it the executioner had said? What were the very last words Halvorsen had heard before the bullet entered his skull?

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Kamilla walked with him to the lift.

‘Are you coming down to the cafeteria?’

‘Thanks, but I’ll pass,’ Milo said.

He wanted to get out. So he could summarise the situation in peace. Alone.

They took the lift down. Kamilla fixed her eyes on him.

‘There are two types of people. Those who hide, and those who launch a counter-attack.’

Milo said nothing.

‘We all know which category you belong to, Milo. And that’s what I like about you. But maybe you should lie low – just this once,’ she continued.

He neglected to answer; just nodded briefly in return. His thoughts were already elsewhere. But he accepted her hug beside the exit. She had never hugged him before.

Milo walked out into the cold, automatically sweeping the area with his gaze. He took in the family killing time, probably because they were waiting in the passport queue. The junkie who sat bent over on a concrete block. The lonely looking man in a down jacket who stood smoking a cigarette.

Was he waiting for Milo?

Was it about to happen here, right in front of the police station?

Hardly. If the aim was to pick him up in order to stage a trial – or ‘assembly’ – they would have to surprise him. Not attack him in broad daylight, in an open area.

Setting off towards his car, his thoughts turned to Antonio Cavalli. But not because the Váli group had tried to drag his grandfather’s memory through the mud. It was something he remembered from his childhood. Something his grandfather had said. The truth of which he hadn’t realised at the time, but which he now understood.

“War makes you distinguish between the important and the unimportant. War hardens you.”

*La guerra ti inasprisce*.

19

Karl Johans gate was deserted, as it often was in winter, apart from a single Romany woman who was sitting on a blanket. She had a paper cup and imploring eyes. Milo cast a twenty-kroner coin into the cup and hurried on across Egertorget square.

As he made his way through the slushy Oslo streets, he called Theresa. She answered on the first ring.

‘*Amore!*’ she exclaimed. ‘I was just thinking about you.’

‘*Ciao bella!* You know how I said that I had to finish a job before I could come down and see you again?’

‘*Sí?*’

‘Well forget it. I’ll be there tomorrow.’

Milo had decided after the meeting with Isaksen. The message had been clear: he was on leave. No active investigative work until the matter was clarified. He’d had his wings clipped by his own boss. And unlike Sørensen, Isaksen had seemed fairly unconcerned about the death threat and hit list being real.

But Milo was taking no chances. Because the more Isaksen and the others tried to play the whole thing down, the more tense he felt. As if his body was preparing itself for a clash – for the impact.

A tiny outburst of joy escaped Theresa on the telephone, but she swallowed it down.

‘Has something happened, Emilio?’

‘I’ll explain tomorrow. No stress.’

He stamped the dirty, wet snow from his shoes and disappeared into Dolce Vita, his Italian bolthole in Oslo. When the place had been threatened with closure, he had gone in with capital as part-owner. A cold gust of air followed him inside and made the café bar’s owner, Roberto, look up.

‘Milo! *Come stai?* How’s it going?’

‘*Bene! Tu?*’

‘Not bad. But it’s bloody freezing.’

‘Well, you knew that before you moved here,’ Milo retorted.

Roberto answered by pulling a ‘you’re damned right about that’ face.

Milo looked around the premises and caught sight of Sunniva, who was sitting in a corner. She smiled at him. He walked across to her table, and she greeted him with a hug.

‘I suppose we should be giving each other a kiss on each cheek, seeing as we’re now in Little Italy,’ she said.

‘*Cosí?* Like this?’

He kissed her on both cheeks.

‘Yep. Just like that. We Norwegians don’t kiss enough,’ Sunniva said, sitting back down again.

‘True enough. Although I must say it looks as if you’ve had more than your fair share of it lately,’ said Milo.

She looked at him, confused.

‘How did you…’

He pointed to his throat, and gave a little nod in her direction.

‘Love bite,’ he said.

Sunniva gave a sly smile, automatically pulling her thick woollen sweater closer about her neck.

‘Oh, that. Yeah, it’s been a little intense lately. I…’

‘Coffee first, Sunniva. Then the talking. *Latte* as usual?’

She nodded, and Milo went to the bar to pick up the espresso and latte that Roberto had already prepared. As he added a teaspoon of sugar to his drink, he considered his sister again. Or half-sister, really. Sitting there fiddling with her mobile, she seemed small. It wasn’t that she was short – it was more the fact that she was so thin that meant she appeared younger than she really was. She could easily be taken for a school pupil, rather than a college student. But at the same time, there was something tough about her. Something uncompromising. Her short, dark-hair. Her brown eyes, which flitted between seemingly curious and accusatory.

For over twenty years she had been a secret, well-kept from him – she had known that he existed, but he’d had no idea about her. Suddenly, he had gone from being an only child to having a half-sister. He could have pushed her away, simply continued as before. But the succession of Cavalli family secrets wasn’t Sunniva’s fault. On the contrary, she was a result of them.

He couldn’t hold that against her.

And anyway, he liked her. She was one of those people who managed to combine impertinence with genuine concern. Even though he’d known nothing of her existence a year earlier, she was family now. An insider. Which meant that there were no limits as to what he was willing to do for her. The truth was that they needed each other. She needed a big brother, and he a little sister.

‘Back to the love bite, little sis. What’s going on?’ he asked as he sat down.

She smiled, her cheeks reddening, just a little.

‘His name is Lars, and he’s a fireman.’

‘A fireman?’

‘With the emphasis on *man*,’ she said. ‘It’s just so fucking freeing to be with a real man – such a contrast to all the student boys with their skinny computer fingers,’ she said.

Milo downed his coffee in one gulp.

‘Now you’re being unfair to your fellow students. Surely they have something between their ears, too?’

‘And Lars doesn’t? Just because he’s a fireman and doesn’t sit at a computer all day?’

The warm glow in her eyes was definitely gone now. There was something aggressive in her gaze, and it struck him how much more like a little girl she seemed when she was angry.

He shrugged again at her question.

‘What about… Karianne? Wasn’t that her name? That’s all over now?’

‘It was fun while it lasted. Right up until she made a political thing about the fact that I’m bi. Apparently bisexuality isn’t possible – according to her.’

‘I see.’

‘Who would have thought that a lesbian from fancy Frogner would turn out to be so fucking narrow minded,’ Sunniva said, and took a swig of her coffee.

A little foamed milk remained on her upper lip, and she removed it with a quick flick of her tongue.

‘And this fireman, Lars – how old is he?’

‘Twenty-eight.’

‘And when do I get to meet him.’

‘Is this the protective big brother who’s asking?’

‘But of course.’

‘You don’t have to look after me, Milo,’ she said.

It sounded like a rebuke, but her anger had dissipated just as quickly as it had flared up. She put her hand on his arm, and added:

‘But I do sort of like it, too.’

He tried to return her smile, but she saw right through him.

‘Has something happened?’ she asked.

Milo hesitated. He had evaded Theresa’s questions on the telephone, but it wasn’t so easy with Sunniva, face to face. She didn’t blink. Only stared at him, eyes questioning.

He fished out his mobile and showed her the website that featured his name, there among all the other individuals apparently deserving of severe punishment. Her eyes narrowed.

‘Holy shit, this is heavy!’

He put the phone back in his pocket.

‘It’s probably just somebody trying to mess with me,’ he said, attempting to seem reassuring.

‘Well in that case it’s not a very fucking funny joke.’

He shrugged. Wanted to keep his worries to himself. But her gaze didn’t falter.

‘Is that what you think this is? A joke?’

‘Well my boss thought I shouldn’t overdramatise it, at any rate.’

‘Idiot!’ Sunniva blurted.

Milo thought of Isaksen’s eyes when they had spoken about the threat. His face had been expressionless.

“It’s more than likely an empty threat. Somebody wanting to stir things up. There are a lot of names on that list, but we have to remember that there is only one murder victim in this case, and that’s Harald Halvorsen,” Isaksen had said.

“So you think the death threat *isn’t* real, but the statements making me out to be a corrupt police officer *are*?” Milo had retorted.

“I don’t think anything until we’ve checked it out,” Isaksen had answered.

But Milo didn’t repeat the conversation for Sunniva.

‘It’ll work out. And anyway, I’m taking a step back from the investigation. I’ve been asked to lie low for a while.’

‘Lie low? You?’

She was the third person to reject that as a possibility.

‘I’m leaving for Rome tomorrow. Going to stay with Theresa. While people work on finding out whether there’s anything to these threats.’

Sunniva nodded, her expression serious.

‘I don’t like this,’ she said.

‘Nor do I,’ Milo admitted.

They hugged each other goodbye outside the café and went their separate ways. Milo turned up his collar, stuck his hands into his pockets, and walked towards Egertorget.

When he cast a glance at one of the store windows, he saw the reflection of a person he’d also seen before he had entered the café bar an hour earlier.

20

There were thirty-eight people above him on the hit list, but Milo could just as easily be next.

Since the first murder had happened in Oslo, it wasn’t inconceivable that the Váli vigilantes would finish their work here before heading south.

Milo hurried across Egertorget and on down Karl Johans gate. He had only managed to cast a quick glance at the man who was waiting for him.

He was in his late thirties. Seemed to be drowning in his down jacket. A determined expression on his face.

The expression of a man who hates waiting in the cold.

On his way past the Paleet shopping arcade, Milo tried to call Sørensen, and then Kamilla. Neither of them answered. He stopped, acting as if he was studying the bestsellers in the window of the Tanum bookstore. Cast a quick glance in the direction from which he had come. The man in the oversized down jacket was around seventy to eighty metres away, but walking slowly, typing on his mobile. Either for appearance’s sake because he didn’t want to get too close to Milo, or because he was in contact with someone.

Reinforcements?

The seconds ticked past, and Milo had to make a decision. Get away as quickly as possible, or be sure to draw his pursuer in. There were several people behind the murder of Harald Halvorsen, but if they could just get hold of one of them, they could at least make a serious start on solving it.

And prevent the next murders from taking place.

He sent a text message to Kamilla.

“I’m being followed. Call me!”

If she answered quickly, she’d be able to bring along a couple of colleagues and Milo would be able to lead the man straight into their arms. If she didn’t respond within the next few minutes, he would have to consider other options.

Should he call the operations centre? Then he’d have to explain the case to a completely unknown colleague. And also explain that he was no longer part of the investigation. He didn’t have time for all that if he was also going to keep an eye on his pursuer.

Milo noticed that someone else had gone up to the man. They were standing close together, talking. The second man was a little older, also wearing a down jacket. In addition, he carried a small, black rucksack. Both men stared directly at Milo. They didn’t even try to act as if they were doing anything other than following him.

What would happen if he waited for them? Would they really make their move in the middle of Oslo’s widest and busiest street, and in the middle of the day?

Perhaps it was feasible precisely because it was so improbable. A taser to his side. Two guys apparently taking care of a friend who’s fainted. And who then jump into a car that conveniently pulls up alongside the curb right in front of them.

Milo walked quickly into the shopping arcade and assessed the situation. The premises were open and dominated by vast glass walls. There were therefore few places to hide. He continued to make his way deeper into the shopping centre and slipped in front of a group of teenagers who were shuffling along at a lazy tempo. He cast a glance behind him, and saw the two men come in through the same entrance he had entered by just thirty seconds earlier. Both of them stopped, their eyes searching the premises.

Milo turned and continued deeper into the centre.

He was more angry than afraid. Angry that neither Sørensen nor Kamilla were answering him. That he had been forced to run away, when what he really wanted to do was run them down. That there were two of them, but just one of him.

Would he be able to take them on alone?

They didn’t seem terrifyingly well built. But he knew all too well that it was never the size of a person’s muscles that determined how dangerous they were.

He pulled off his coat and went into the opticians, where he could study the rows of eyeglasses while the mirrors enabled him to see what was happening behind him.

The two men were working quickly, but seemed far from panicked. They peered into each store, moving closer and closer. They were four stores away from him, and there wasn’t so much as a single pillar for Milo to hide behind. Something told him that they wouldn’t be fooled by the fact that he had taken off his coat.

He knew that he had to keep going. Even though the stores weren’t full, there were enough people around to risk members of the public getting caught in the crossfire should fight break out in which weapons were drawn. He glanced around him and saw the escalator up to the second floor. Wasn’t there a door to the back of the building up there? What if he managed to draw them after him, up and out? If he timed it right, he would have just a few valuable seconds to prepare. So that they would never have a chance to draw their weapons on him.

He walked with rapid steps. In the middle of the escalator he turned, and saw that the two men had caught sight of him. Then he was at the top; they were at the bottom. Ten metres up ahead he saw the door that led out into the building’s rear courtyard. There was a pushchair there, too, probably left there by a mother or father who didn’t want to leave it out in the snow. As he passed it, he saw the little umbrella sticking up from it. It had a white plastic handle, a pink canopy. He snatched it to him and disappeared out the door. He could hear the sound of boots – he didn’t need to turn around to know how close they were. He increased his speed and disappeared around a corner. Well out of sight he stopped, pressing himself flat against the wall. His only weapon was a little child’s umbrella. But he would need nothing more. Provided he moved quickly enough.

As the first man rounded the corner, Milo hooked his leg with the handle of the umbrella. As the man stumbled forwards, Milo jumped out towards the second pursuer, planting a fist right in the middle of his face before following this up with a knee to the stomach.

Milo then turned back to the first man, who had fallen heavily and was about to turn around. But before he could do so Milo was there, punching a fist hard into the side of his head. The man lay there, still and silent.

The other was now getting his breath back after Milo had kneed it out of him. He began to fumble around in his jacket pocket. Milo knew that his only chance was to render both of them unconscious, find something to cuff them with and then call for back up.

‘Fucking…’

Before the man could say more, Milo had taken a step towards him and punched him again. This time, the man lay still.

Milo looked around him. Two unconscious, bleeding men.

Was this all the Váli vigilantes had up their sleeve? Was this all they could do?

It had been far too easy. Something was very wrong.

He pulled the bag that one of them had dropped towards him; opened its zipper and tipped the contents out onto the ground. A camera, an extra lens, a pair of mittens, a packet of cigarettes.

And a key card.

Milo snatched it up and cursed as he recognised the newspaper logo on the photographer’s access card.

*Figlio di puttana!*

He breathed out. Could still feel the effects of the adrenaline after his body had exploded into movement. In his pocket, his phone vibrated. He fished it out, and saw Sørensen’s name.

‘This is Milo.’

‘Hey. I know you’ve been taken off the investigation, but I just wanted to let you know.’

‘Let me know what?’

‘The Váli group have executed a guy in France. Michel Seucleur.’

‘Seucleur?’

‘Yes – do you know the name?’

‘The Seucleurs are often called “the Medicis of our time”.’

‘Right. And now Europol has gone completely nuts.’

They were about to end the conversation when Sorensen thought of something else.

‘Hey – Milo?’

‘Yes?’

‘Journalists have started calling me. They’re getting really aggressive, and will probably try to get hold of you, too. If you get a call from an unknown number, don’t answer it.’

Milo stepped over the two lifeless bodies.

Back inside the door to the shopping arcade, he set the little umbrella back in the pushchair.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I just turned down an interview.’

21

The execution of Michel Seucleur was just as brutal as that of Harald Halvorsen.

But Seucleur was more irritated; louder.

‘Idiots! Don’t you know who I am?’

He spoke English in a heavy French accent, which only made him sound even more furious. He had probably never been contradicted in his entire adult life.

This was the refined French aristocracy against reckless Norse vigilantes.

Michel Seucleur had obviously not heard that he was number five on the list of persons who, according to Váli, deserved to die.

The prosecutor straightened his documents at the lectern.

‘We know exactly who you are. And that’s why you’re here, at the Just Assembly in Honour of Váli.

The Seucleur family was primarily known for its many – and enormous – donations to the arts, culture and research. An entire wing at the Louvre bore their name, and housed the artworks the family had donated. They funded several professorships at both Oxford and Cambridge, and had established a dedicated Institute of Cancer Research in Amsterdam. And all across Europe, visual artists, painters, authors, musicians and dancers created art with the help of the highly sought after Seucleur scholarships.

It was this boundless philanthropic attitude that had earned the family the moniker of “the Medicis of our time”, after the Florentine family that had dominated the European art scene for several centuries, and which had been of critical importance for the Italian Renaissance.

In spite of this: Michel Seucleur now sat with his hands tied behind his back, turned to face a prosecutor. With a judge to the right of him and an open laptop on a chair to his left, where a digital jury listened carefully to all that was said.

‘This must be a misunderstanding. Nobody else in all of Europe contributes more money to the arts, culture and research than we do.’

Michel Seucleur was clearly still irritated, but the volume of his voice had dropped a few notches. The prosecutor cleared his throat.

‘The use of your fortune is not our concern – we are concerned with its origins. And its victims,’ he said.

‘Victims?’

At this point the judge interjected in an authoritative voice, and the prosecutor was permitted to continue. Milo had turned the volume on his mobile almost all the way up, in order to ensure that he heard everything that was said. He didn’t understand the motive for kidnapping and executing a member of a family who were regarded as great benefactors, either.

But the prosecutor of the Just Assembly in Honour of Váli presented a version of the Seucleur family history that differed somewhat from the official one.

‘You are the main shareholder in Meditech Medicals, and have been since the company’s establishment in 1954. The shares are owned through various companies in the Cayman Islands, and in 1976 you moved to Monaco. You have kept a low profile as owners, but maintained a much higher profile as philanthropists.’

The prosecutor spent a few minutes explaining the growth of Meditech Medicals up to the present day. The company produced a range of lucrative pharmaceuticals with patents of an extensive duration, for which there were few competing products.

‘But it is the production of opioids that provides the greatest profit of all,’ the prosecutor said.

Seucleur didn’t bat an eyelid.

The hooded prosecutor, his face partly hidden behind a mask, continued:

‘You have helped to drug people into hopelessness, despair and poverty,’ he thundered.

He held up a sheet of paper.

‘This is just one example of studies you have financed in which the results have been manipulated. In which the addictive nature of opioids is played down.’

He held up another sheet of paper. Held it in the air for a long time, with a dramatic and deliberate pause for effect.

‘The list of doctors on your payroll is long. We also have evidence of how your products are prescribed in connection with several different kinds of health complaints. Increasingly *minor* complaints. Due to its addictive nature, this is a product that should be sold in the smallest possible volumes to as few patients as possible. You have sold it in the largest possible volumes, to as many patients as possible.’

At this point, Michel Seucleur was no longer able to hold his tongue.

‘Now listen to me! These are completely legal products!’

But the man across from him didn’t deign to throw so much as a glance his way. Instead, he continued to speak, describing how the pharmaceutical company targeted doctors in poorer areas. Where the patients were consistently less well read, and therefore more inclined to follow a doctor’s recommendations to the letter. And this had sent sales of the drugs through the roof.

‘Opioid addiction has become an epidemic. In the past year alone, it has claimed the lives of almost 50,000 people. You have contributed to the creation of this epidemic, and you are profiting from it,’ said the prosecutor.

As evidence that the company itself had realised it had crossed a line, he referred to the many out-of-court settlements the company had entered into. Long before a number of controversial cases had managed to reach the courts, Meditech Medicals had bought its way out of them.

The prosecutor took his longest dramatic pause yet.

‘You have always relied on settlements. But in this court, no settlements will ever be made.’

Milo leaned back in the car seat, filled with a sense of growing unease. He had watched the video through twice. Although he hadn’t seen the symbol – the well, the sun and the open book – he knew that it must be painted on the wall. But what he had seen clearly this time was how the executioner had bent down and whispered. And how Seucleur had stared around him in confusion.

What was it that Seucleur had heard right before his execution? Milo wondered.

The prosecutor’s story sounded probable enough, and should be easy to check. Milo also knew that this group went a long way in justifying their actions. If the same people were behind the website that hosted the hit list, he knew that they were happy to use false information to achieve their ends. The fabricated entry about him was enough to spread uncertainty, but not an outright humongous lie.

Milo could feel he was starting to get too hot under the collar. He had to get away. Retreat, to gather his wits. Something for which the apartment in Rome was perfectly suited.

Until now, all this had been about the murder of a Norwegian investor, and some threats made against a number of others.

It was now obvious that the threats were not empty. The Váli vigilantes had started working their way down the list of people who deserved to die.

And Milo Cavalli was one of them.

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*A framed quotation hangs on the wallpapered wall beside the desk.*

*“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”*

*(Walter Benjamin)*

*His eyes slip from the screen back the quote on the wall. Barbarism and civilisation, hand-in-hand. As if this is a kind of excuse for what has happened. As if an execution can ever be excused. But the remorse is not tangible in the slightest.*

*Harald Halvorsen deserved it.*

*Michel Seucleur deserved it.*

*Everyone gets what they deserve.*

*Video number two has been released and is causing exactly the right reactions. Loathing and condemnation. But also admiration and applause. One of the computer screens is filled by the video and the feeds from Twitter, Facebook and various web forums. On the other screen is the news. The police, talking about ‘leads’.*

*As if they have any idea where they should be looking.*

*One of the photographs was taken just as the press conference was ending. The chief investigator standing in a corner, scratching his shiny bald head. His expression serious. Worried. He’s probably one of the force’s most competent members, but right here he seems completely out of his depth.*

*Nor is the young woman any threat. She’s fresh. Keen. Has already received a reprimand. Has a sick brother. That might be useful to know, should it become necessary to take action.*

*But the Italian – it was important to do something about him. Now that he was no longer in play. At least officially – although it was likely he would continue on his own. And if he did so, he must be stopped.*

*If Milo Cavalli became a problem, he would be met with wrath.*

**27 February**

22

The sixth sense.

Eyes in the back of your head.

Intuition.

Or as Sørensen put it: feeling something in your bones.

Milo would never have used any of these expressions. He simply knew.

He knew that somebody was watching him. That someone was following him.

Ever since he had entered the departure hall at Gardermoen airport, he had moved with a level of vigilance that was unusual for him. Twenty-four hours ago, he might have smiled at the whole thing. But not today. Not after Váli video number two.

He checked in and fast-tracked through the security barriers. In the lounge, he found himself a quiet corner. With his back to the wall he could maintain a good overview of his surroundings, and he automatically scanned the other passengers who came and went. He had twenty minutes to kill, and so took out his mobile. Frikk answered with a shout.

‘Milo! Heeeeeeeeeey!’

The loudmouthed stockbroker and Milo’s former colleague was his eyes and ears in the field. Like so many others in the financial sector, he had an infinite need to brag about his extensive knowledge and skills, and consequently Milo never needed to worry about being perceived as an inconvenience when contacting Frikk to find out the current word on the street in the industry. But he never asked him about anything to do with shares – that would be a conflict of interest, considering Milo’s job as an investigator of financial crimes. It occurred to him that he should probably be more careful in his contact with Frikk. Especially now, when his affairs would be gone over with a fine-toothed comb in order to find out whether there was any substance to the allegation that Milo was corrupt.

But before he instituted radio silence with Frikk, he needed information.

‘Beer tonight?’ Frikk asked.

‘Sorry, change of plans. I’m heading straight to Rome.’

He could hear the disappointment down the line. Like a little brother whose big brother has just told him that he doesn’t have time to play after all.

‘You’re not coming out drinking with us? But it’s Friday!’

‘Not this time,’ Milo answered.

‘Is this because you’re on the list that those lunatics have drawn up?’

Milo didn’t have a chance to answer before Frikk continued.

‘You can just come and stay at my place. Lie low there for a while. Nobody would need to know.’

‘What about Sigrid?’ Milo asked.

‘Sigrid who?’

Milo smiled at his friend’s affectation.

‘I know you haven’t forgotten the woman you live with,’ he said.

‘We weren’t living together. She stayed with me for a while, but that’s over now. She had the grandma gene – *big time*,’ Frikk said.

The world certainly hadn’t missed out on a couple’s therapist in Frikk. His credo was that, over time, women always showed their true, boring selves.

“Women turn into wives. Wives turn into grandmothers. And grandmothers don’t suck cock”, was his reasoning.

‘Shit. And I was going to show you something,’ he said.

‘What?’ Milo asked.

Frikk sighed on the other end of the phone.

‘You really have to see it. And hear it.’

But just like a little kid, he couldn’t help himself.

‘I’ve bought myself a Tesla,’ he said enthusiastically.

‘Oh, right. Like everyone else in the financial sector. I didn’t take you for an electric car enthusiast, Frikk?’

‘But that’s precisely the point, Milo. I’ve put a V8 in it! 324 horse power! How about that! Right?’

‘So you’ve bought yourself a Tesla, thrown out the electric motor and installed a petrol engine instead?’

‘Exactly! Or, not me personally. A guy in Sweden. We think it’s the first Tesla in the world to have a petrol engine!’

‘But, why?’ Milo asked.

‘Because.’

‘Because?’

‘Listen, Milo. I love oil. Fuck, I’ve earned my entire fortune on it. Oil shares, rig shares, seismology – you name it. And it isn’t just me who’s got rich on it – all of Norway has got filthy rich on oil, and now we’re supposed to, like, drive electric cars – or even worse, electric *bicycles* – to save the environment, and pretend as if the oil hasn’t been good for us? Fuck that shit.’

Milo smiled half-heartedly.

‘Okay. I’ll take it out for a spin with you when I get back.’

‘Damn right you will.’

The departure screen showed that it was time to *go to gate*.

‘Hey, Frikk. Have you heard anything about Harald Halvorsen?’

‘Heard anything? What do you mean?’

‘Rumours?’

‘Is this an interview, or…?’

‘Relax, Frikk – I’m just curious. And anyway, I’m off the investigation,’ Milo said.

Silence on the other end of the line. And when Frikk spoke again, his voice had dropped a few notches in volume.

‘People say he had a project in Russia.’

‘Russia? What kind of project?’

‘Some kind of major investment. That’s all I know,’ Frikk said.

Russia – again, thought Milo.

Frikk interrupted his train of thought.

‘But let me ask you a question, Milo.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘How serious are things between you and Theresa? Like, really?’

‘Pretty serious,’ Milo answered.

23

He stopped, and stood watching Theresa from the corner of the building, ten metres away. She looked like a character from a Hemingway novel – dark-haired, brown-eyed, chestnut complexion.

With her deep, velvety laugh and strong political opinions, Theresa seemed the very personification of the Latin revolutionary. The type of woman you first fought for, and then fought with.

It was almost nine o’clock. Theresa was sitting with four friends, chatting and smoking. Milo let his gaze slide across to the man sitting next to her. On his feet were black boots that almost reached his knees. They were decorated with spikes. His trousers were black leather; his belt buckle the shape of a skull. His shirt was black silk, and over it he wore a black leather trench coat. On his hands were black fingerless gloves, out of the ends of which stuck ten black-painted fingernails, Milo knew.

But it didn’t stop there.

His hair, which hung far below his shoulders and which must have been fairly dark to start with, was dyed coal black. Black eyeliner and eyeshadow always encircled his eyes. Black lipstick completed the look.

Biagio Tori had known Theresa since high school, and Milo suspected that their acquaintance had begun as an infatuation – on Biago’s part. Before he had started wearing his black uniform. When Theresa had introduced Milo to him a few years ago, it was as if those feelings were re-awoken – only this time directed at Milo. He had never felt such intense interest from a man before. But the explanation was simple: Biagio loved Norway and all things Norwegian.

It had started with his interest in black metal music; bands like Mayhem and Burzum. This then led him to study Norwegian at university in Rome, where he immersed himself in the country’s language and literature.

‘I’ve learned Norwegian from Ibsen, Snorri and Burzum,’ he often said.

He spoke the language with a thick accent, with heavily rolled r’s and using old-fashioned words. Milo always had to grin at Biagio’s “Henrik Ibsen meets Satan” style. A leather-clad, heavily made-up twenty-something who spoke Norwegian like a ninety-year-old in a nursing home.

Right now he was waving his cigarette before Theresa, who was laughing at the story he was telling. But Milo could also see how she lifted a hand and squeezed her lower lip between her forefinger and thumb, something she was in the habit of doing when deep in thought. Milo liked to see her do this. It gave her a pensive look.

He could also see that she was cold. She was sitting with her upper body bent forwards, her hands pressed together. One leg crossed over the other as she pulled her scarf close around her throat. The light from inside the restaurant cast a golden glow over the four friends, and there was something photographic about the scene: a group of young, carefree Italians enjoying the evening and each other’s company.

Theresa was astonishingly beautiful. Milo felt a pang of joy as he stood there, watching her. The kind of happiness that arises only rarely, and so hits you all the harder when it does. And then it struck him: why in all the world hadn’t he made the decision earlier? What on earth had he been waiting for?

He checked his email one last time. For a moment he considered calling Sunniva, but pushed the thought aside and put his phone in his pocket. He could call her tomorrow. No further interruptions tonight. Ten metres up ahead he saw Theresa steal a glance at her watch as Biagio lit another cigarette. Then she lifted her gaze and looked around. It was as if she knew she was being watched. After a few seconds her eyes found Milo, and her face broke into a smile.

Beside her Biagio jumped up from his chair and came towards him with open arms.

‘Milo! The most beautiful woman in Rome is sitting here waiting for you. You lucky prig.’

‘Lucky *pig*, you mean.’

‘*Cosá?* What?’

‘I thought pig and prig were the same,’ said Biagio.

‘Not quite the same,’ said Milo.

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They didn’t get home until quarter past one in the morning.

There had been many dishes and a bottle of wine to share. And grappa, too – unfortunately.

As they hit the bed, they each gave out a sigh, followed by a small laugh. They undressed each other with calm, tipsy movements, kissing deeply and for a long time before he entered her.

They were too intoxicated – either by the alcohol, or their passion, or both – to care about the precautions they had taken so far.

Afterwards, when she lay in his arms, her nose buried in the little dip at the base of his throat, Theresa mumbled sleepily:

‘What if I get pregnant, Emilio? What happens then?’

Milo lay on his back, his eyes closed, stroking her naked shoulder.

‘Then we’ll have a child, Theresa.’

A short time later, he was asleep.

He dreamed about a man sitting in a chair, hands tied behind his back. He couldn’t see his face. Heard only heavy breathing.

The sound was coming from somewhere behind him. But when he tried to turn around, his body refused to obey.

**28 February**

24

Teresa’s department at the university was next to the Termini railway station, in the part of Rome that wasn’t full of ancient ruins. Instead, the area was dominated by rectangular, fascist-inspired buildings from the 1960s.

*Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*, said a sign, and this was the only thing to indicate that the colossal building before them was an educational institution, and not some other kind. They had a visiting lecturer from the US this week – which was why Theresa would have to spend part of her Saturday in the lecture theatre.

She rose onto her tiptoes, stretching up to kiss him warmly.

‘Thank you for this morning,’ she said with a satisfied smile.

‘Thank you yourself,’ said Milo.

‘You’re sure you don’t want me to drop the lecture? I want to spend as much time as possible with you while you’re here.’

‘It’s only a couple of hours. We have all evening and tomorrow. And anyway, I’ve agreed to meet somebody.’

She looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

‘I’m going to a metal concert.’

When he had heard that Theresa would be attending a lecture, Biagio had insisted.

‘It’ll be *enchanting*,’ he said in Norwegian, in all seriousness.

Milo only had to walk for a few minutes before he found the right building.

*Dipartimento di Scienze Documentarie Linguistico Filologiche e Geografiche*, said the text on the red brick wall that encircled the property. Beneath this was a poster that proclaimed one could experience *un’ viaggio nella cultura Norvegese* – a journey through Norwegian culture – in the little yellow-painted building just inside the wall.

Milo pushed open the dirty grey iron door. As he did so he caught sight of a group of five or six people standing beside the entrance. One of them was Biagio. Still dressed in black, but this time with his long, raven hair in a ponytail. It reached all the way down to the small of his back. He was chatting eagerly with an older woman. The contrast between them couldn’t have been greater: the top of her head reached only as high as the lower part of his chest, and she was wearing a cardigan and pleated skirt. Her legs were two stumpy logs that ended in a pair of practical shoes without heels; her flesh-coloured nylon stockings stopped just below her knees. And unlike Biagio, her face bore not a trace of make-up.

‘Milo! You came!’

The Italian black metal enthusiast shook him lightly by the shoulders. Then he introduced Milo to Signora Brizi.

The little woman in the pleated skirt took his hand and smiled.

‘She’s going to be reading from Ibsen’s poem *Terje Vigen*,’ Biagio said.

He pronounced the poem’s title ‘Tårje Fiken’.

‘I’ll look forward to it. And what will you be performing?’ Milo asked.

Biagio handed him a sheet of paper on which the various acts were listed. Milo read it.

‘Not quite Ibsen, then,’ he said.

The event started the customary twenty-five minutes late, and the premises were half full. Biagio was the sixth and penultimate act to perform. He stood with his back to the audience, his stance wide. His black leather trench coat extended almost to the ground. The song’s intro came over the speakers – the sound of a music box mixed with the sound of animals and children’s laughter. Then the guitars and drums came in, making the audience jump. Milo glanced at the programme in his hand, which gave the name of the song: ‘*Avmaktslave*’ by Dimmu Borgir. After a few seconds, Biagio’s hoarse voice could be heard through the microphone:

*Som en slave i avmakthetens tilstand, råder ei annet enn nederlagsbekjennelse.*

And the chorus got straight to the point:

*Retrett. Du har ei livets rett. Retrett. Du har ei livets rett.*

*Retreat. You have no right to life. Retreat. You have no right to life*.

Signora Brizi stood beside the stereo system, trying in vain to keep the beat.

After the concert, Biagio invited Milo to lunch with the others in the group.

‘Thanks, but I think I’ll pass. I have to get a bit of work done before Theresa and I go out to eat.’

Biagio nodded sympathetically, then hugged him and kissed him on both cheeks.

‘*Ciao vichingo!* See you, Viking!’

25

Milo opened a Peroni and picked up his Mac from the kitchen table. The beer was cold, and he had the urge to down the entire bottle in just a couple of gulps.

He woke the laptop from sleep mode and opened his email. There were three new messages from Temoor. His colleague must have heard that Milo had been taken off the investigation. But at the same time, he would know that Milo wouldn’t be able to leave the case alone.

“The information about Seucleur seems to be correct. They’re the majority owners in Meditech Medicals, a company that produces opiates. Which is raking it in. And which has entered into a huge number of out-of-court settlements,” Temoor wrote.

Attached were several court documents and a list of the company’s owners. The second email contained an updated version of the list of Halvorsen’s financial activities.

Milo glanced at the two Excel spreadsheets. The one that listed Halvorsen’s assets, the other those of the Seucleur family.

Could there be a connection between the two families that they had overlooked? Some link or other, a point of contact?

The third email from Temoor was a PDF of an article printed in the *Finansavisen*. In which Halvorsen’s investment in Russia was mentioned, in addition to a real estate project in Spain. The newspaper reported building stoppages and threats to take legal action.

Halvorsen was obviously an unpopular guy. But enough to execute him? Milo was unsure.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard for a moment. Waiting. Then he typed in the web address www.deservedeath.com. The list had got longer since he had last looked at it. But when he saw that his name had been moved even closer to the top, he felt something harden within him. It was as if somebody was sending him a message; letting him know that he was on extremely thin ice.

He fired off a response to Temoor:

“You’ll have to investigate whether there’s any link between my family and the other victims. Beyond the fact that I know Einar and Elisabeth Halvorsen.”

His mobile notified him of a text message. It was from Kamilla.

“Everything okay? K”

“Apart from the fact that somebody wants to kill me, everything’s great,” he answered.

A few seconds passed, and then came the reply:

“Yep, I can see you’re still on the list. But most people think you’ve been put on there just to fuck with the investigation, right?”

“My boss doesn’t seem very worried, no.”

“Sorry. I get this is heavy. Hang in there, k?”

“I’m hanging in there. Get this investigation done, k?”

“Europol are in charge now. I have to speak English 😊. In the meantime: be careful!”

“I will.”

No more messages came. His eyes were automatically drawn towards the open window, and he noticed how he had started constantly glancing over his shoulder. The journalist and photographer who had followed him in Oslo had been a false alarm. An irritating reminder of just how vulnerable he was: anyone who wanted to get close to him would be able to do so.

And with the resources the Váli vigilantes had at their disposal, they could just as easily get to him here, in Rome.

The sounds of the street outside reached him on the sofa. The tooting of horns, engines running, voices.

He got up. Walked over to the window, but stood just to one side of it. So he wouldn’t be visible from the street, but would be able to see out. His gaze slid across the street and pavements below. Stopped at the sidewalk café. A couple without inhibitions regarding public displays of affection. A woman with a glass of prosecco. A man talking on his mobile, a bike helmet hooked over his arm. Did he cast a glance up towards the apartment? Milo studied him. Watched how he ended the conversation and stuck the phone into his pocket. Looked at his watch. He was waiting for someone.

The same feeling as at the airport. Somebody was watching him. It was clear that they had been digging around in his family’s past – the details given on the hit list confirmed that. Even though the allegations were unsubstantiated. In all likelihood they knew about this apartment, too.

Should he cancel dinner with Theresa? Eat at home instead?

He rejected the idea when he heard a key turning in the front door.

‘Are you sitting here in the dark, Emilio?’

He hadn’t noticed the evening darkness that had descended; that the room was now lit only by the screen of the laptop on the table. Theresa turned on the ceiling light and came across to him. She kissed him and smiled.

‘Did you manage to do all you needed to?’ he asked.

She lifted the bag in her hand.

‘*Sí.* And it’s nice to come home to you, instead of an empty apartment.’

‘It’s nice to hear you come home,’ he answered.

Neither of them said anything further. Theresa had learned not to pressure him. Milo had learned not to talk about expectations he was not yet able to meet.

‘I’m just going to change, and then we can go eat,’ Theresa said.

‘Maybe I should do the same,’ said Milo.

She looked at him, half lying, half sitting there on the sofa.

‘No,’ she said. ‘You’re perfect as you are.’

26

They walked through the quiet of the evening streets, arm in arm.

Every now and then they stopped, right in the middle of the road, to kiss. Like a parody of a couple in love. Rome, lit by its streetlights, acted as a vast stage set; one that seemed to have been erected for them and them alone.

The apartment was a fifteen-minute walk from the restaurant, and they sauntered down alleyways and passages before they emerged onto a slightly wider street. The pavements were so narrow that it was impossible to walk on them side-by-side, so they walked in the road. Milo on the outside, Theresa the inside.

Without saying a word, Milo took off his winter jacket and draped it over Theresa’s shoulders. She smiled warmly at him.

They strolled on, before stopping to kiss yet again.

As they parted from their kiss, Theresa took a step back and stood there in the middle of the road, gazing at him. A car shot out from a side street just a few metres away, turned sharply and came towards them at full speed, as if the driver was drunk. Both stared at the headlights in surprise.

Like small deer on a country road.

Milo felt an icy panic that the car was too close. That Theresa didn’t stand a chance of jumping out of the way.

Instead of stepping backwards into safety, Milo took a long stride out into the road and pushed Theresa hard in the shoulder, so that she fell sideways in the direction of the opposite pavement. Then using all the strength he had, he took a running jump up into the air to avoid being hit by the car while he had both feet planted on the ground.

He had made it around thirty centimetres into the air before the car slammed into him. It hit him in the right thigh, flipping him over in the air. His head hit the vehicle’s bonnet. Pain rushed through his entire body, and as the car suddenly slammed on the brakes he was thrown forward again. His head suffered yet another crack as it hit the cobblestones.

In his final second of consciousness he saw Theresa lying just a few metres away from him.

Her body lay there, lifeless. Contorted into a position that only a ragdoll could achieve.

Or a person who had suddenly had the life crushed out of her.