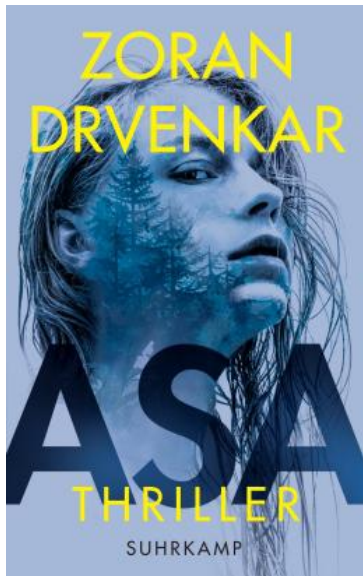




Zoran Drvenkar

Asa

Thriller

(Original German title: Asa: Thriller)

700 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 18 August 2025

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2025

Sample translation by Joel Scott

pp. 7–58

ASA

1

They're waiting for you to surface. Their shadows are dark clouds that group together like clenched fists, their movements are so cautious, it's like they don't trust the ground beneath their feet. You watch them through the ice sheet, your arms moving gently, as if they don't want to disturb the water.

You didn't end up here by chance.

You reacted instinctively and sought clarity.

And look around you, things couldn't be any clearer.

You're in a frozen lake, four metres beneath the ice, and you've got no idea how things are going to play out. You only know that you can't expect any mercy from them. *Only those who have felt mercy can show mercy.* Those aren't your words, that's what your father said to you at

the beginning of your training. And since you've never come into contact with mercy yourself, you don't expect anything different today.

And so you push off from the bottom of the lake and begin your ascent.

They don't attack you from above but from the side. At the last moment, you slow your ascent with your arms and become an angel spreading its wings. Only your hair keeps floating toward the opening in the ice like a jellyfish being pushed up by the current.

The butt of the rifle misses you and sends up a spray of water.

They were expecting you.

They knew you needed air.

They were wrong.

You only surfaced because you wanted to see how they would react. Your hands move and you slowly sink back to the bottom of the lake. You've reached your goal. Now they're off balance, wondering if they injured you with that one blow.

They're also wondering where you get your stamina from.

You've got to be completely exhausted, they think.

For four days you've been in the wilderness, and they've been hunting you for two of them, without a second's pause. It's a miracle you didn't collapse a long time ago. The worst thing was that you couldn't get to the cabin. That would have been a safe haven. A door that locks. Four walls offering protection. Although you had stayed within the vicinity the whole time, the

risk had been too great. They repeatedly blocked your path to the cabin, leaving you only the frozen expanse of the lake or the surrounding forest.

You chose the lake.

Though the forest offered more opportunities, fleeing to the woods would have prolonged the hunt. You want to end it, but on your own terms. That's why you instinctively ran out onto the lake and stopped in front of the hole in the ice that the hunters had used for fishing just the day before. You were unarmed, so you had nothing but your bare fists, and with them you pounded on the fresh ice. The skin on your knuckles ripped open, leaving the ice around you speckled with blood, your breathing was controlled, your head completely clear. It only took seven blows, then the water splashed up into your face. They heard the echo of the pounding in the forest and followed the noise. By the time they got to the hole in the ice, they found only your clothes and boots, but you had disappeared into the water.

The lake is your last refuge.

And now you're making them wait.

You swim to one of the spots where air has gathered in little bubbles under the ice. You have learned to recognize these inclusions by the greenish light that shines through the ice sheet. There isn't much air, just enough for one long breath. You swim back and stay at a depth of four meters, observing what is happening above you.

And you make them wait.

And you make them wait.

Above the ice, it's minus twelve degrees, below the ice, the cold is a scalpel that cuts to the bone. At these temperatures, it makes no difference whether you're dressed or not, but the clothes and your boots would have restricted your movement.

It's better this way.

Everything slows down at these subzero temperatures.

Your heartbeat, your blood flow, your thinking.

When you're about to run out of air, you look for the next bubble. It's further away from the hole. There's not much oxygen left trapped under the ice around you, yet you delay the moment of surfacing to the point of pain. You want them to doubt themselves. You want them to think the butt of their rifle injured you and you were carried away by the current. This thought will unsettle them, and you want them unsettled. And so you patiently watch the dark clouds move above you. They are restless, they are impatient. You think you hear their voices through the ice, but that must be an illusion.

You must be tired, they say.

I am tired.

You must be angry.

I am perfectly calm. It's time.

Yes.

Just as you are about to emerge from the lake, you stop mid-movement, because the daylight above you awakens a memory. The light has a grey and cloudy shimmer to it, like the light in the eyes of the wolf that you took down at the age of eleven. You hear the echo of the shot in your ear after pulling the trigger, and the wild beating of your heart, only slowly growing calmer. The wolf is lying in the snow, not a breath moving its chest, one of its paws twitching and then going still. Its eyes are dull, the pupils grey and cloudy, but your father had warned you. He said there were fish you could pull onto land that would lie there motionless, but if you threw them back into the water after a while, they would swim away as if nothing had happened. So you approach the wolf with trepidation. You step toward it reluctantly, regretting your rushed shot. You had been aiming at the heart, but at the last second, you yanked the rifle. Now the wolf is lying in front of you in the snow, and hot steam is rising from the wound in its neck. Through the bullet hole you can see the snowy ground, it is soaked with blood, and the blood glistens black. You bend forward and prod one of its front paws. Nothing. You reach over and tap the wolf's chest. The reaction is so sudden that it takes your breath away. At that moment, you become the prey that has walked into a trap. There is a loud crack as its teeth snap shut, closing on the stick in your hand, then the wolf collapses back into the snow, the stick still clenched in its jaws. You've learned from that. The animal was more dead than alive, but it still reared up for a final battle.

You'll never forget that.

And just as you are now floating under the ice and surrounded by the same gloomy haze that you saw back then in the pupils of the wolf, you now see the connection between then and now, and you understand what it's trying to tell you.

You change your plan.

You turn around in the water and dive all the way down to prise a stone from the bottom of the lake.

It has a good weight to it.

You make a fist, and the stone disappears inside of it.

This is the clarity you've been searching for the whole time.

You spread out your arms and legs and let yourself drift with your back to the sky. The bottom of the lake starts to slowly pull away from you. You rise higher and higher, until your left shoulder bumps into the jagged edge of the hole in the ice and you feel the air against your skin. Your head is still underwater, your eyes are closed, you are motionless, you are dead, and you don't have to wait long – hands grab at you and haul you out of the lake.

There are four of them, and they are panicking.

– Turn her over! Quick, turn her over!

– You hit her too hard, we can ...

The third man falls silent when he sees your face. You let him turn you over, you were heavy and lifeless, and before he can finish his sentence, you open your eyes and kick his legs out from under him, sending him tumbling into the ice hole. Water sprays up, and before the other men can react, you swing the rock. The man to your left staggers backward, drops his rifle, and sinks to his knees with his hands over his face. That leaves the other two. They've stepped back, arms outstretched as if trying to catch you.

– That was hasty of you, says one of them.

He's right. It really was hasty. You should have drawn out your unconsciousness and let them carry you to the cabin. But you moved too quickly, and now there's no turning back.

You won't run away again, this is it now.

Look at the way you're crouching there – naked, on all fours, like an animal. The tension travels through your body as a tremor, and suddenly, the ice beneath your feet feels scorchingly hot. It's an illusion. If you crouch here any longer, the soles of your feet will freeze to the ice.

The two men pull out their knives, the third man hauls himself out of the hole in the ice, while the fourth man gets to his feet and wipes the blood out of his eyes. He picks up the rifle and spits on the ice.

They wait.

Not a word is exchanged.

They're waiting to see what you'll do next.

You bare your teeth with a snarl and become a wolf that doesn't want to die.

And that's how you attack them.

Later, you're sitting in the cabin, and the stitches holding the wounds on your arm and the split above your eye are stretching with every movement. A blanket is wrapped around your shoulders, and you're wearing your clothes again, but your teeth are still chattering uncontrollably. The fireplace is lighting the room and warming you up, but only slowly.

They're sitting across from you drinking coffee from thermoses.

They shake their heads and say they've never experienced anything like this before.

They've tended to your wounds and ask no questions.

One of them has a broken nose, the other can't lift his left arm, but they're not complaining, because they feel a little embarrassed for having taken longer than expected to finish the hunt. At the same time though, they're proud. You can see it in their eyes. They are brimming with

respect. The one with the broken nose pats your head as if you were still a child. One of the others hands you a slice of bacon.

You shake your head.

You don't eat meat that you didn't kill yourself; it's disrespectful to the animal.

You put up a good fight, they say.

You nod, knowing they wouldn't be alive if you'd done what you wanted to do. You had the chance. More than once. But you followed the rules, because that's how life is. There are rules.

You lift the cup and drink.

You don't speak, you think a lot, but don't show that you're thinking a lot.

They say it's time to get going.

You stand up and leave the cabin like a warrior showing off her first scar.

You are fourteen years old and mercy is foreign to you.

It's thirty years later, war is raging in Europe, and your godfather is looking at you as if you'd just grabbed him by the crotch. You're sitting next to each other and neither of you says a word. You can smell his aftershave. He can't smell you, because you've come from the cold and are still scentless. It's not a pleasant situation. Your godfather didn't notice you until you sat down next to him, the cable car didn't even rock. He wasn't expecting to see you until he got to the summit. So it's no wonder his face looks the way it does.

Silently, the two of you glide up the mountain.

Your godfather waits for you to look at him. But you only have eyes for the falling snow, which is floating past you lethargically, reminding you of your restless thoughts. You're forty-four years old, and moments like this one here can really shake you out of reality. Your thoughts are like flakes of ash after a forest fire – they float above the landscape, seemingly weightless, ungraspable. And then there's that inner restlessness, because you know you're nearing the final showdown.

Your godfather has no idea what's going on inside you.

You haven't seen each other since your grandfather's funeral. That's twenty-one years ago. Unlike you, life has been kind to your godfather. Wotan Berger lives in Lyon, where he is the CEO of Armada, one of Germany's biggest arms companies. Normally, he is flanked by four bodyguards, which is one of the reasons why you are sitting here in this ski lift with him.

There's only space for two.

Before the wall fell, your godfather had been a good friend of your father, then he left Germany and lived in the Netherlands for a while, before moving to France. First he sold cars, then it was real estate, and now he supplies military planes to clients all around the world. Wotan Berger is a multi-billionaire, and he spends every winter here.

The two of you are east of Rovaniemi in the middle of the Finnish countryside. This ski resort is so exclusive that it's not listed on any maps. For mere mortals, it's impossible to make a booking. The hotel can house thirty guests, and they are flown in and out by helicopter. At night, the ski lift is closed, but they've made an exception for Wotan Berger.

You know all this because you came prepared. When you have six years to think things over, you can make a whole lot of preparations.

Your godfather was hardly thrilled when he found out you wanted to come and see him here, but he acquiesced in the end. Perhaps because of his connection to your father, perhaps because he's afraid of you. You can feel it – if he could, he would edge away from you, but there's no room.

A Plexiglas dome is protecting you from the snowfall. The cable car isn't rocking, and it's almost as if you're not the ones that are moving, that it's the landscape that is gliding past you. Every square metre is lit up by floodlights, you could be hovering above a film set. Through your lined trousers, you can feel that the seat you're sitting on is heated, and you wouldn't be surprised if there was a minibar hidden in here somewhere. Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives* is emanating from a pair of speakers, almost inaudibly, the music hugging the landscape and opening within you a longing for your old life, but at the same time, the harmony around you feels jarring. But that doesn't necessarily mean anything, because lately, lots of things have felt jarring. The past weighs on you heavily, threatening to suffocate you. Just a moment ago, you were under the ice, waiting to run out of oxygen, then a wolf was snapping at you, and now it's thirty years later and you're sitting in a cable car, hoping that your head clears. Sometimes you're a teenager, sometimes you're a child, and sometimes a woman, lost in her memories. Everything is moving too quickly. Even the seasons race past you, and you can hardly feel the change.

Actually, that's not true.

The passage of time is obvious. Every new day leaves a scar in your consciousness, because with every passing day, you realise the mistakes you've made in your life. Your daughter would now be nineteen, your father still by your side, your husband too. But your failures go back even further than that. Let's be honest, they began on that one winter's day when the four hunters pulled you out of the ice. Back then you were aware of what was happening, but you didn't know what to do with the knowledge. The hunters should have died that day. Then everything would be different. You're still paying for that error to this day, and there is no way to make up for it. But perhaps that will change today, because one of those men is now sitting beside you.

Your godfather clears his throat.

You're centimetres away from one another, but you act as if you were floating through the night all on your own.

Come on, pull yourself together and look at him.

The sight of him startles you a little, his features no longer belong to him. Maybe he got a facelift or got a bit carried away with the Botox. The only things you recognise are the broken nose and the blue eyes. The rest is a sculpted and tanned facial landscape.

– It's been a while, he says.

– More than twenty years.

– More than twenty years? Really?

– Really.

He knows full well how long it's been since you last saw each other. His eyes give that away. They are nervous, because you haven't come here to talk about old times. At your grandfather's

funeral, your contact had been brusque. He avoided you, and you let it slide. You didn't know then what you know now.

– When did they let you out of prison? he asks.

– Yesterday.

– Yesterday?

He laughs.

– And today you've come to see *me*?

You turn your gaze away from him, that's enough of a response. He can not only sense the urgency of your presence, he can quite literally see it – you are eyeing the landscape, looking for any snipers you might have missed. And though you know that your godfather would never dare to make a move against you, relying on this knowledge alone would be royally stupid. No matter which direction you look, there's not a great deal to see, the sharp edge of darkness is clearly defined by the floodlights. No animal dares to stray into that light, and the snow on the run is untouched. Nevertheless, you don't trust the calm. You're also well aware that the entire piste is monitored by cameras.

– It would be good if we could be alone to speak, you say.

– We *are* alone.

You look up. Your godfather follows your gaze to the speakers that are installed in the ceiling of the car.

– Marco, he says, cut the connection. And while you're at it, turn off this damn music.

The piano falls silent, and there's not a sound to be heard from the speakers.

– So, to what do I owe the pleasure? asks Wotan Berger.

– You have to call off the project, you reply.

He doesn't respond, his left eyelid twitches.

– I thought you'd want to talk about the arms deals.

You shake your head.

– I don't know anything about any arms deals.

– I thought they had sent you, to ---

– It's got nothing to do with any arms deals, you interrupt him, that's not why I'm here.

He doesn't believe you. He's sitting right in front of you and doesn't believe you.

– Business is business, he goes on.

– Wotan, I'm not interested in your business.

– If you knew how hungry the market is---

– That's enough!

Finally, he shuts up.

– You have to call off the project, you repeat, that's the only reason we're talking.

He lets out a laugh. It's a laugh that's supposed to inspire respect. You look at him with an empty expression. Knowledge is everything. You know what he has built up over the past few years in France. He's gathered together the elite of the elite, and all the preparations have been made – the buildings and the roads are ready, there is even a small airport. You know all the details and have seen photos of the camp. There's nothing left standing in the way of the training programme, and in two winters' time, the first test is set to go ahead. The whole thing is your godfather's pet project. He sees it as a tribute to your grandfather, who had helped Wotan

Berger's family out of a difficult situation many years ago. And now here you are, wanting to take away from him the thing he's worked for his whole life.

– We could have sorted this out a different way, he says.

– No, we're going to sort it out this way, you reply firmly.

Suddenly Wotan Berger, sets off on a digression. He is no longer the businessman who sells fighter jets, he is your godfather, the man who would give you a pile of books every birthday. Even his voice takes on a different tone, it's melancholic.

– I can still remember it all so clearly, the way we pulled you out of the water. For three whole days you had us running around like idiots, and then you jump into that goddamn hole in the ice! We thought that was it. Thought we'd lost you. But then you reappeared and you were no longer Asa, you were some kind of fury. You put the fear of god into us that day, you know that? And you had already well and truly passed the test. But you refused to give up. You Kolberts sure are a mad lot, and this here ...

He taps his crooked nose.

– ... I have you to thank for this. Whenever anyone asks, I say that my godchild broke my nose with a single blow. The doctors wanted to correct the break, but I won't let the surgeons near it. This is a very private memory.

He smiles and his voice trails off, as if he regretted the sudden emergence of the feeling of melancholy. Then he looks intently at his hands, and as he goes on, the Wotan Berger from before returns, the one who left his old life behind when the wall fell, and who feeds on war in his new life.

– Did your family send you?

– I have nothing to do with my family anymore.

– We had a deal. I paid them money, so that---

– I said I have nothing to do with my family anymore, you interrupt.

He nods silently. He knows what your family did to you. But still. In the eyes of your godfather, blood ties stand above everything else, which is why he doesn't believe that your family doesn't know that you're here. *But that's how it is*, you think, and you flinch imperceptibly as he places his hand in his breast pocket.

Wotan Berger pulls out a little case, opens it up, and sticks a cigarette in his mouth. He's slowly starting to get impatient. After all, he's not sitting here because the two of you have some emotional bond. He lights the cigarette, draws the smoke deep into his lungs, and breathes it back out. He doesn't want your family to send someone. Especially not someone like you.

– I see, he says after a pause, and looks up at the hotel complex that is slowly being carved out of the darkness, sitting atop the summit like a luminous crown. You'd like to put your hand on his shoulder and push him out of the cable car. Just because you could. But it's not that easy to get rid of this man.

You know full well that your godfather has planned this encounter down to the last detail.

His bodyguards have been active since the early hours of the morning. Two guards were posted on the chair lift, you spotted two snipers in the surrounding area, and four men were patrolling the roads in. Then there are all the cameras recording your every movement. A man of his calibre knows how to deal with danger. He would never just let you go. Especially now that you have told him that nobody sent you. Your honesty changes everything. Suddenly you're on your own on his turf. He can easily ensure that you never make any demands ever again. But you exude a sense of calm, and he doesn't know how to take that.

– You don't seem worried at all, he says.

– Should I be worried?

– I sure am.

– We're just talking.

– Nothing more?

– Nothing more.

He looks at the clock.

– I've flown in a chef from Madrid for you. Her name is Perri, you two belong ...

Suddenly he falls silent and his gaze wanders down to you and it's only now that he notices your clothes for the first time – the snowsuit, a pair of snow goggles on your left upper arm, and those boots. He's trying to understand what you need snow goggles for in the middle of the night. And he notices the rip on your right sleeve. He doesn't know what caused the rip, just like he doesn't know that you were attacked, and that one of his bodyguards had to die for it. But he knows that more has happened than he had realised. It starts to dawn on him, it starts to dawn on him in a big way, and when he finally speaks, he sounds like someone who is about to break out in a panic.

– You were already up the top?!

– I've been here since yesterday, you reply.

He looks at you.

– I had a cup of tea with your chef at lunch today, you add.

Your godfather sits in silence, thinking about his bodyguards, who are supposed to be waiting for him at the top.

– All of them? he asks.

– All eight, you say.

He hesitates, then he shakes his head, as if he had just changed his mind.

– Then they weren't worth it, he remarks.

You've had enough of this chatter.

– I want to hear you say it, you tell him.

He laughs again, the edges of his laughter are brittle.

– Look, if it's so important to you, then fine: the project's over. Are we good now?

He flicks his half-smoked cigarette out into the night. His surrender seems so easy, it's too easy, much too easy. He has invested millions in this project, he will have to explain himself to the investors if he pulls the plug now. It doesn't surprise you that he's lying. You'd have done the very same thing.

– Thanks, you say.

Thirty metres left to the summit.

There's nothing left to say, but he still can't keep quiet.

– I work a lot with the Russians, as I'm sure you can imagine.

He laughs like someone who wants everyone to know how cunning he is.

– You want to know what they call you?

No, you don't want to know.

– *Mir*, he says.

You look at him in disbelief, confused.

– I am *not* peace, you say.

– I know. You create peace, in your own special way, but you are the very antithesis of peace.

– So it's ironic?

– More or less.

The cable car reaches the summit and slows down. From the turning station, a cleared street leads up to the grounds of the hotel. There's no car parked there, nobody is waiting for you. The cable car is now moving at an imperceptible pace, your boots are hovering ten centimetres above the compacted ground. You stand up and step onto the snow. Your godfather goes to do the same, but you turn around and put a hand on his chest and push him back onto the seat. The cable car is trying to keep going, you feel the pressure on your arm and hold firm against it. Then you bend forward and get so close to Wotan Berger that he pulls back ever so slightly.

Your voice is composed.

– One more thing. If you do continue the project, I'll be back. I'll come back and I'll bathe you in your own blood, you understand? Just like in the old days, when revenge was still revenge. I'll take you into the forest and wait till the wolves have gotten your scent. I'll sit and watch as they rip you apart, and when they're done, I'll spit on your bones, that much I can promise you.

He doesn't react, he just stares at you. And you can read it all in his eyes.

Anger, outrage, hatred.

But there's something else.

Your godfather's gaze flickers, then he smiles, his words are silky:

– I can't help but think of your father.

Your mouth gets dry, he goes on:

– You know I was against his execution, right?

– Your position on the matter didn't help him too much, you say.

Your godfather doesn't respond, his jaw just keeps grinding, and the muscles in his cheeks bulge. You had no intention of talking about your father's execution. The next question is one you never wanted to ask, you ask it:

– Could you have prevented his death?

You really hope he says no, that he calms you down, even if it's just another lie.

– I could have tried, he says.

– But you didn't?

– No, I didn't.

A wave of regret envelops you.

I could have tried, but I didn't.

– You have to understand, he continues. Your father went too far, Asa, and when you go too far, often it's not possible to turn around, and you have to suffer the consequences ...

You interrupt his tirade by taking a step back.

Your godfather falls silent immediately, his eyes grow wider, and you're sure that it's the first time in quite a while that he's felt fear. *Be without fear, otherwise the night will devour you*, you want to say to him. Those aren't your words, they're the words of an assassin. After she said those words to you, she smiled at you, and then she died.

That's how it began.

Without that encounter, you wouldn't be here.

The chair lift starts moving again, the cable car turns around at the station, and your godfather begins to silently hover into the valley. He doesn't swear at you, doesn't say another word about your father, and that's a good thing.

He looks over his shoulder just the once.

Your eyes meet.

Wotan Berger is relieved that you've let him go. He turns back around, and after a minute, a thin cloud of smoke rises from the car. You know he has his phone pressed against his ear, you also know that the cigarette in his hand is trembling. You even know what he's thinking – you've made yourself his enemy.

But he's got it all wrong.

You're nobody's enemy, and you're nobody's friend.

You don't feel any rage, you know no hatred.

That's all behind you.

You're a woman who brings peace.

Mir, you think, and you wish you could laugh about it.

But you don't laugh, because your godfather's words are ringing in your ears:

"I can't help but think of your father."

And you think about your father as well.

Your father yells. You yell. The world yells back. The mountains shift, an avalanche of stones thunders down into the valley, and the two of you erupt into laughter. It's one year after you completed the test, it's October 1993, one year after you decided to go under the ice. You were left with a scar above your left eye, and it shimmers white when you get angry. The test has left its mark on you, and nothing is the same as it had once been. And if time were to one day decide to move backwards, you would follow it in a second. Back to childhood, back to safety. But you know that doesn't work. Even if you bite and scream, time won't negotiate with you.

So let's stay here for a moment.

One day in your memory.

Your forty-four-year-old self is thinking back on your fifteen-year-old self.

Reminiscing on a moment that belonged to you and your father alone.

The two of you screamed into the face of the valley, and then you laughed.

Do you remember the feeling of calm that came over you afterwards?

As if the air was holding its breath.

You reach the summit and the land opens up beneath you like a fan made of wilting colours. The two of you have been up and moving for a good hour now and have watched the ground fog clearing out from between the cliffs. The morning light flickers as if it were about to go out, the forest below you seems tired, all around you, the exhaustion of nature is palpable. It was a hot summer, the region was plagued by wildfires, and you're both happy about the coming cool of autumn.

A screeching causes both of you to flinch.

Your father points to the sky, where a hawk is frozen in flight. The bird has its head tilted to the side, as if it were peering down at you. Its cry dies away and there is nothing else disturbing the calm. You wish it would stay like this forever. Civilisation is shut out, there's no plane crossing the sky above you, no house marring the view. This here is real life and all of this has been created by your family. They bought up one hectare after the other of the neglected forest and breathed new life into it. This is where you belong, you're at home here. And this is where you want to stay. Each tree, each rock formation speaks to you. You could stand here for an eternity listening to them.

– So beautiful, says your father.

You say nothing because you have no words to describe what you feel.

In the west, the tops of the pines move like the fur of some enormous animal, and in the north, the lake whose ice you dived under last winter glitters. Nobody had been able to understand how you were able to do that, your grandfather was the only one who had praised you and said that in your family, there was a tradition that often took the Kolberts beneath the ice. You didn't understand what he meant at the time, and he didn't get around to explaining what he meant by it, because in the same breath you told him about the girl. Dotti. The look of pride completely disappeared from your grandfather's face, and he told you to keep your mouth shut. Your grandmother's reaction was no different, telling you not to say another word about the girl. But nobody told Asa Kolbert to keep her mouth shut, your grandparents ought to have known that. So you went to your father, and that might have been your worst mistake. That's how everything got out of kilter and why your father ended up facing off against his family. But we'll get to that later. For now, we're standing on this plateau and looking out onto the landscape and your father saying:

– It'll take a while for this wound to heal.

– Five years, you say.

– At least.

The wound is the burnt strip of forest where lightning struck a few months ago. The mountain range stopped the fire's advance, but had the wind been different that day, the whole area would have gone up in flames. In spring, your family will plant new trees, they are very conscientious about that stuff. There are rituals and rules, there's a system of caring for the wildlife and there are laws that must be observed. And yet, this winter, a change will take place, one that takes aim at the very nature of your community – your father has called an assembly. After half a century, he wants to put a stop to the tests. Nobody has ever made a proposal like that before, and if it is passed, your father will make a lot of enemies. He has taken the first step, and the entire family has come out against him.

And it's all because of you.

Your father shrugs off his backpack and sits down on a tree stump. With his mariner's cap on his head, he looks like a captain who has mistakenly wandered into the mountains. You know that the black cap has been handed down from generation to generation, and how it didn't disintegrate years ago is a total mystery. It originally belonged to your great grandfather Marten, who was part of a research trip to Antarctica in 1901 and received the cap as a gift from the captain. It is cherished like a talisman, and your father doesn't leave the house without it. Now he's turning the cap around in his hands, letting his head cool off.

– I could stay here till winter, he says. Or at least until the first snowfall.

He closes his eyes and holds his face into the sun. Suddenly, he smiles, and says:

– Do you remember how terrified I was? You almost gave me a heart attack.

You don't have to guess what he's talking about. It's his favourite story.

– You saved me, you say.

He looks at you and nods.

– Yes, I saved you.

Then your father shakes his head, as if he still can't believe it.

– How on earth did you fall in there?

– That was the plan.

– Asa, nobody plans something like that.

You grin and say with the stubbornness of a child:

– Well, I did.

– You could have broken your neck.

– I was prepared.

– With tea and biscuits?

– And a book.

Your father nods.

– I'd forgotten all about the book.

You can instantly see the dustcover and feel like you can smell the paper.

– Nana didn't even notice that you had switched out the book, you say.

Your father laughs.

– Those kinds of details have never been important to your grandmother, and it's not like you noticed it either.

He's right. You genuinely believed that your father had climbed into the well the following night and had fished the book out of the water for you.

– You would believe anything I told you back then, he says.

– Well, I was only six.

– No, you were five.

– You sure?

– Very.

You were five years old and fascinated by the idea of a hole in the ground that you could pull water out of. At that time, the well out the back of your house was covered with just a few wooden planks. Nobody used it anymore, but nobody wanted to fill it in either. Whenever you could, you would hang out close to it, and of course your father forbade you from moving the planks.

– There are rats sleeping down there, he said.

– I'm not afraid of rats, you replied.

Sometimes, your ball would roll away and happen to land next to the well. Sometimes you would skulk past like a cat and touch the river stones the well was made from. And when you stood on your toes, you were able to shift the planks a little. For some reason, you had a sense that there was more in this well than just water. It was your grandmother who had put that idea in your head. In truth, though, she'd just been trying to comfort you.

Your Nana is more than just a grandmother to you. She was your best friend and a substitute mother all at once. She held your father together when he nearly fell apart after your mother's death. And she told you stories, lots of stories – about where your mother came from and how she used to speak, what her thoughts and dreams were like, the kind of music she listened to, the books she liked to read. Back then, you didn't suspect for a second that these were all made-up stories that were supposed to take away your grief. Once you asked your Nana where your mother was now and she answered: "She's in the darkness, but that's not bad, Asa, because in that darkness, your mother is a light."

You didn't need to hear more.

Suddenly, everything made sense.

Four stacked bricks from the shed got you to the right height. You moved two of the boards and carefully looked down into the well. Patiently you waited until your eyes adjusted to the darkness, and finally, you found her – there was not just a bucket on a rope bobbing on the surface of the water, your mother looking up at you from down there, with a questioning expression on her face, and it was so easy – you could communicate with her without words.

The next day, you drew a picture for her.

And of course you sensed that it was your reflection that was looking up at you. You might have only been five, but you didn't come down with the last shower. And yet, you still had the tiniest bit of hope that your reflection might be more than just a reflection. Everything made sense, everything had its magic. That's why you drew your mother a picture. It sailed down into the well as a paper plane and the next day it had disappeared. You thought your mother had folded up the paper plane and pinned the picture on the wall of the well. And of course you wanted to get a closer look at that. So you packed your bag. Tea in your thermos, biscuits in your tin, and

your favourite book on top, in case your mother wanted to read you something. Then you waited for the right moment – your father was busy sanding a table in his workshop.

You crept across the grass on your tiptoes.

Your plan was really quite simple.

You wanted to grab the rope that the bucket was hanging from an abseil down. You had seen people doing that in films, and anything people in films could do, you could do better. So you sat down on the edge of the well and took a deep breath. Your mother looked up at you and asked what you were up to. You explained your plan. She couldn't help but laugh, it was a really hollow, bottom-of-the-well-laugh that tickled in your stomach. Your mother hadn't imagined your plan would be so simple. But you straightened your backpack, grabbed the rope with both hands, and slipped off the edge. What happened then happened much more quickly than it ever did in films – the rope slid through your hands, and you plummeted like a stone and landed in the water with a splash. It was a brutal shock. But it wasn't the shock of suddenly being in the well that hit so hard, but that everything had been so different to how you'd imagined it. From one second to the next, you were lying in the water and had to cling to the bucket to stop from going under. Your temple was stinging, and blood was running down your cheek. You tentatively felt the scratch on your brow and wiped away the blood, and it wasn't until you managed to put one of your feet in the bucket that you took a look around.

The light was gloomy down here, a kind of twilight, but no matter how intently you looked, your mother was nowhere to be seen, and there was also no drawing pinned to the wall of the well. That's when you started to get a bad feeling. But before you were able to fall into a panic, your father called out to you. It was more of a whisper. You wanted to call back that he didn't need to whisper, but your own voice was just a tiny squeak that got stuck in the shaft of the well. *He'll never hear me*, you thought, and tried to scream, but that was no better. Everything in the well stayed in the well. It was hopeless.

To your surprise, though, your father must have heard you.

His head appeared above you on the edge of the well.

– Asa, what are you doing down there?

– I... I'm having a picnic.

You snuffled.

– And why are you crying?

– Because I'm all wet.

– Should I get you out?

– Maybe.

– Well then step into the bucket.

– I've already got one foot in there.

– Good, well, put the other one in there too.

That was easier said than done. You kept slipping, and the bucket was tipping to the right and the left. It was only when your father grabbed the rope and pulled it taut that you could get your other foot in the bucket. It was cramped, and you were wobbling around and clinging to the rope with both your hands, but you didn't have to do anything else, just stand there and wait for your father to pull you the ten metres back to the top.

That same night, you woke up with a fright. You realised something that shook you to your core. So you got out of bed to creep into the next room. You stood in the doorway and watched your father sleeping. You couldn't say a word, you had to just look at him and hope that he noticed you. After what seemed like an eternity, he woke up and asked:

– How long have you been standing there?

– For days, you answered quietly.

– Do you want to come and lie down next to me?

Of course you wanted that, but you shook your head, because you were disappointed in yourself.

In the depths of sleep, you realised that you'd still be stuck in the well if your father hadn't found you. That's why you couldn't lie next to him, the whole stupid thing had been your fault.

Yours and yours alone. And someone who does something so stupid and endangers themselves like that can't be rewarded.

– Next time, I'll save you, you promised your father.

– All right, he said. I look forward to it.

And so you went back to your bed.

And that's how you learned that there are mistakes that you just can't make.

And you also learned that not everything is like in the movies.

That's all a decade ago, and a story that belongs to you and your father alone. It gives the two of you a feeling of togetherness. You can fall, and you know that he will always catch you. No matter what happens.

– Ready?

Your father straightens his mariner's cap and you continue your hike.

On your way into the valley, you shoot two rabbits and gut them.

The hours glide along almost silently.

As the twilight sets in, you set up your bivouac among the firs. You gather wood while your father places rocks in a circle to build a campfire. You roast the rabbits, eat and chat, as the wind drifts along above you, making the tops of the fir trees sway and creak. Just before you go to sleep, your father asks the question that you don't want to hear.

– Did your Nana speak with you?

Ever since you told everyone about your encounter with Dotti, it has been a very turbulent year. Your grandparents have stopped speaking to you and the village has completely ostracised you. The mother of one of the other kids at school even stopped next to you on the street one time, wound down the window, and called you a traitor. It was so absurd, because the two things had nothing to do with one another. You laughed in her face, you couldn't help yourself. Of course there was a hysterical note to your laughter. Nobody can just stand there and take being insulted and cut off by their family.

You were a teenager, and laughter was your best weapon.

But there was no laughter that could extinguish the look in the eyes of your grandmother.

She leaves the bakery when you walk in, she crosses the street when she sees you coming and looks the other way theatrically. The last time you spoke was shortly before this hike. You were packing your bag in your bedroom, and when you turned around, your grandmother was standing behind you. She grabbed you by the arms and said this was your last chance. "Pull yourself together, Asa!" You had no idea how she'd gotten into the house without being noticed. She wanted you to take back your statement, and she asked you what you were trying to achieve by endangering the whole community with your assertions. "Think about the people here, think about your grandfather, you're breaking his heart. This is his life, his whole existence that you're playing with." Your grandmother spoke about tradition and pleaded with you to be reasonable. She also said you were just trying to get attention, and then came a shift, it was like

a change in the weather – she uttered the next words with a warmth that completely flummoxed you: “And never forget how much we love you.”

Then she stepped to the side and let you go.

Your father doesn’t need to hear all that, so you reply:

– Nana hasn’t said a word to me.

Your father can tell that you’re lying.

– Your grandparents hate change, he explains, making it sound like a justification, and then quickly adds: but change is important.

– Even when those changes destroy everything? you ask back.

– Don’t you worry, Asa, they’re not going to destroy anything.

– It sure feels that way.

– Because they want it to feel that way, but don’t let them fool you.

Your father places his hand on your shoulder.

– Change *has* to happen. You were vigilant and honest. You are the change. I’m proud of you, you hear? When something is right, it’s right.

And when something is wrong, it’s often more powerful than what is right.

You think that, but you don’t say it out loud, but you still can’t keep your mouth shut.

– So why did nobody notice before? you ask.

– Because nobody survived before, your father responds, and the dryness of his words makes them all the more awful, because you’re hearing what you don’t want to hear – your father is also torn, he too has been living with this tradition since his childhood, but he stuck by you and

is willing to risk the whole system falling apart. His words hang between you like a bank of clouds, because your father is part of the whole thing, he is one of the ones who survived.

– You should have prepared me, you say.

– No, I couldn't.

He looks at you.

– Your mother would never have forgiven me. She thought the tests were wrong. Long before you were born, I had to promise her that you wouldn't be one of them. Neither hunter nor prey.

– And yet you still sent me to take part in the test.

– Because I wanted you to make your own decisions.

He places his hand on your cheek, you want to lean against it and close your eyes and fall asleep, right there. The past year is weighing heavily upon you. Your father takes his hand away.

– That's enough about that, he says. The assembly is in a week, there'll be more than enough time to talk about that then.

– Yeah, that's enough, you say too, and are happy that it's enough.

You lie next to the fire with your heads resting against one another, and above you, the tops of the firs have stopped swaying.

You both have time, you breathe time, you sleep.

The night opens up like a dark flower.

The stars twinkle indifferently.

And then sleep comes.

And the two of you wake up before the first light.

While your father fans the remaining embers to start a new fire, you go and get water from the mountain spring nearby, which flows hesitantly between the rocks but never runs dry, not even in winter. It takes three minutes for the canteen to fill up. The birds are still quiet, the mountains and the forest still belong to the two of you alone. You boil tea and watch as the sun floods the valley with light and tears apart the morning fog. It's the last day of your hike, it's the saddest day. Every year the same ritual, every year the same sense of satisfaction. You traverse the country of your ancestors from one border to the other, with your father keeping a log and noting down all the changes. Which trees are sick? Which animals have been taken by predators? Which populations of game have gotten too big? This time belongs to the two of you alone, during this time, your thoughts are like two hawsers tangled around one another, forming one length of rope. And like every year, you bemoan the fact that after four weeks, your hike has to come to an end. The only thing left is the descent, then you'll arrive at the log cabin, and life will continue on its course.

That's what your grandmother always said.

You miss speaking to her.

Whenever you would visit her, there was always that brief moment when she would look at the framed photo above the fireplace and fall silent, stopping right in the middle of what she was saying. This moment never lasted long, and you would always sit it out in silence. The picture was a black-and-white photograph with a zig-zagged edge. 1968. Josefine, Matthias, and Ludwig. Only the sons survived the test, and it tore your grandmother's heart apart that she had lost her little girl. She deals with the loss in silence and with an insatiable pain. Whenever she

picks up the photo, she takes a deep breath and says, almost inaudibly: “Even if we take care of each other, life takes its course and leaves us dead in its wake.”

– What are you thinking about? asks my father.

– About the winter, you lie.

The two of you don’t speak much, and you enjoy the melancholy.

The descent is also a kind of goodbye.

We’ll be here again next year, you think, next year is just around the corner.

Through the treetops, you can already see the slate-grey roof of the log cabin in the valley. Two more hours, then you will have reached your destination and be visible to Xavier.

– I bet he’s baked something for us again, you say.

– I really hope it’s his poppyseed cake, says your father.

The property is monitored by two cameras and is only accessible via a trail through the forest. There is a sealed road, but it goes around the forest, still some two kilometres away from the cabin at its closest point. The water comes from an underground spring, a gas tank heats the log cabin, and a generator provides it with electricity. There are six of these cabins in the surrounding forests. One of them is where the first test happened. That cabin once belonged to great aunt Arnika, and was her home for a decade. The other cabins are spartanly furnished and are just places to take shelter during hunting season. The log cabin here in the valley is an exception, because it is the second home of your family, and ever since you were a child, it has been the place where you wanted to live one day.

– Would you get a look at that, says your father.

You step out of the scrub and onto the plateau where you always take your last break. There is a big expanse of rock and a fireplace made of river stones that you arduously lugged here in your backpack over years and arranged into a circle. From up here, you have a clear view onto the suspension bridge below, which connects one side of the valley with the other.

The view is intoxicating.

You're just about to sit down on the rocks and take off your backpack when some movement down in the valley catches your eye. You squint your eyes a little and focus in on the suspension bridge. No, you weren't mistaken. You can see a man and a woman. They have no business being there, because that whole side of the valley including the mountains is private property, and hiking or any kinds of excursions are forbidden. Whatever these hikers are doing, they can count themselves lucky that they haven't run into your grandfather. From this distance, you can't recognise their faces, but you can see how they are dressed.

– Why are you laughing? asks your father.

– They're wearing the same clothes as us.

– Who?

You point down into the valley. Your father takes a step forward to get a better look.

– Down there, on the suspension bridge. Do you see them? He's wearing the exact same mariner's cap as you, and she...

You don't get any further than that, because behind you, a grey goose flaps up out of the scrub. Its wings whip the air, its barking sounds hysterical. You spin around, and your father reacts the way only your father can react – he spins on his heels, and as he does so, his rifle slides from his shoulder and lands in his hands. Before you can say anything, he has the weapon ready to fire. His finger is on the trigger, and you are waiting for the shot, but instead, your father's chest explodes outward with a puffing sound, and you are enveloped by a cloud of blood.

Your father stands there motionlessly, his mouth drops open, he looks at you in astonishment and doesn't understand where all the blood covering you from head to toe is coming from. He wobbles, and before his legs can give in and he falls to the ground, you realise with terrifying clarity what will happen next – there is a second bullet heading for you.

THE GREEK

1

– Two bullets?

– Two.

They laugh, they say:

– That's ridiculous.

– You'll never manage that.

He shrugs his shoulders and replies:

– Two it is.

They exchange a glance, they shake their heads.

– Not at this distance.

– The wind is too strong.

He just looks at them.

They are travelling as a trio.

The Dream Couple and the Greek.

The Greek is called the Greek even though he actually comes from Italy. His real name is Nicco Alfi, and he was born to the east of Naples in the neighbourhood of Barra, where at the age of six, he faced off against a boy who had stolen a hunk of bread from him. The boy was three years older and became his first victim. In doing so, Nicco drew attention to himself – as a

snotty-nosed brat who lived on the streets, slept in a dingy hovel, and didn't let anyone take anything away from him.

It's always the first impression that counts.

A prostitute decided to take the boy under her wing. Her name was Nova Bella and Nicco was one of six children for whom she provided a room with mattresses in her apartment. In exchange, the kids had to beg on the streets, run errands, and take care of the household. Soon enough, everyone in the neighbourhood knew the boy with the pitch-black eyes, who stole like a fox and ran like a gazelle. Nicco was swift, laconic, and devoid of humour. Anyone who saw him couldn't help but be reminded of a caged animal gnawing at the bars of its enclosure. Nobody got close to him, and things might have stayed like that for a long time if Nicco's value hadn't suddenly changed – at thirteen, he shot up, and Nova Bella pulled him off the streets and made him her bodyguard. With a baseball bat under his chair and a *Zagor* comic on his knees, he sat in front of her bedroom door while she saw her clients. Nicco accompanied Nova Bella while she did her groceries and went to the hairdresser, and he was allowed to sleep in her bed when it was free. This all went well for two years. Then came the spring of 1967 and a wave of strikes washed over the south of Italy. The following summer, all of Naples stank of rubbish and the garbage bags piled up in the narrow alleys like carelessly discarded corpses, twitching and trembling. The rats roamed around in packs, nested in the rubbish, scurried through the pipes, and crawled up out of the toilet bowls. By day, the inhabitants of the city cursed the government and by night, the shop windows were smashed and cars set alight. After the waste management workers, the bakers joined in on the strikes, and they were followed by the tradespeople and the plumbers. It wasn't a good time to see the sights in Naples. But wherever there is a wave of strikes, strike-breakers are never too far behind. The government recruited workers from the provinces, who were supposed to blend in with the general populace and foment unrest. One of the strike-breakers ended up in Nova Bella's bed. Nicco didn't know his

name, so what happened that night was nothing personal. After they had had sex, the strike-breaker began acting erratically, and strangled Nova Bella until she was lying unconscious on the floor. He stole her money from her handbag, imitated her high-pitched, nagging voice and called out to Nicco. The boy ran straight into the room, where the strike-breaker was waiting for him behind the door and knocked him to the ground. He cackled at Nicco and pissed on his face before leaving the house and strolling along the alleys singing loudly. In the first bar, he bought everyone a round of wine and said that he really liked the neighbourhood and that from now on, he would be the one getting paid by the prostitutes, not the other way around. Two days later, his body was found in a sewer. The police asked questions, and though everyone knew who had committed the murder, nobody mentioned Nicco's name. Nova Bella was in the hospital for a week and left it with strangulation marks on her throat and a brittle voice that would never sound shrill again. When she found out what had happened to the strike-breaker, she didn't react the way Nicco had expected – no praise, no reward. Nova Bella broke into a panic, the fifteen-year-old had become too dangerous for her, and so she quickly sold him. His new owner was called Port Paris. He was the one who recognised and honed Nicco's natural talent, making him into a hitman over the following years. He was also responsible for his new name, and ultimately placed the Dream Couple by his side.

– Two is impossible, says Ruben.

– Not at this distance, repeats Stina.

The Dream Couple is Stina Haugen and Ruben Dahl. They come from Norway, where their families were enemies for over a century. After all that time, nobody could really remember what the feud was about, but that didn't keep the family members from abusing each other on

the street and unleashing hateful tirades on each other. As children, Ruben and Stina were the best of friends, and as teenagers this friendship turned into love. Of course, the families were none too impressed by this connection – Ruben’s father beat his son half to death, while Stina was locked in the basement for a month. When the Dream Couple met again, they knew there was only one way to get out of this miserable situation. They were seventeen years old and *Wild at Heart* was humming through their veins, *Natural Born Killers* was their anthem, and *Bonnie & Clyde* their swan song.

In the early hours of 16 July 1989, the two farms went up in flames and none of the members of either family survived the fires. A neighbor saw Ruben’s father’s white Mercedes drive away, but then the trail went cold.

The Dream Couple had found their calling and were driven by a new passion – they found it frighteningly easy to kill. They had no remorse, only an intoxicating sense of comfort and a freedom they had never felt before.

Three days later, they reached Barcelona.

Stina waited tables and Ruben DJed in a club. They stuck around in Spain for a year before their passion sent them back onto the road. After a brief stop in Switzerland, they arrived in Rome and got into trouble with the police on the very first day when their car was searched at a traffic stop and the police found a woman in the trunk, gagged and handcuffed. Rome would have been the Dream Couple’s final destination had Port Paris not heard about their arrest. He used his connections and was waiting for the dream couple the next morning at the back entrance of the police station. Two years later, Stina and Ruben were trained and killing for money, a year after that, they were in a German forest with the Greek, doubting that two shots would be enough.

– That’s got to be...

Ruben is leaning forward, squinting one eye while looking through the rangefinder with the other. The Greek would really like to give him a kick in the ass. From the very first moment, the Dream Couple has been a burden to him. They're also the reason they lost track of their targets and are now racing against the clock.

The Dream Couple had come directly from an assignment in Brussels and were four hours late. The Greek had sat patiently in his hotel room and observed the position of the targets on the monitor of his receiver. A GPS tracker ensured that he knew the targets' current location to within ten metres. That all came to an abrupt halt when the Dream Couple finally showed up. They mumbled an apology and waltzed into the hotel room as if it belonged to them. Ruben disappeared into the bathroom, and Stina threw herself onto the bed and turned on the television.

– Four hours, said the Greek.

– We'll make that up, said Stina.

Ruben came out of the bathroom and started to rummage through the minibar. The Greek grabbed his suitcase and his rifle and took them to the car. *Just stay calm*, he said to himself, *it'll all be over in a few hours*. When the Greek returned to the hotel room, he took his jacket from the hook and heard Ruben say:

– Cool.

– Can you see them? asked Stina.

– No, they're just two green dots.

– Let me see.

– Catch!

The impact was dull, the Greek turned around, Stina was in the process of picking up the remains of the receiver.

– Fuck, said Ruben.

– The screen's busted, said Stina.

The two of them looked at the Greek as if they were waiting for a verdict. The Greek didn't hesitate and hit Ruben in the face with an open hand so hard that Ruben fell to the floor, then he snatched the remains of the receiver from Stina's hand. Anything could have happened in that moment, including the Dream Couple drawing their weapons. The Greek would have dealt with that too. But none of that happened. Ruben got back on his feet and stood there like a ten-year-old, holding his cheek. Stina stuck out her bottom lip and remarked in a petulant voice that nowadays, everything's made of cheap plastic.

– We should get going, said the Greek.

And so they got going.

If the Greek is honest with himself, it's not the dream couple's fault at all, all the blame lies with Port Paris. "They need someone to back them up, let them learn from you," he had said, and then quickly added: "and besides, it's easy money." The last statement in particular sat uneasily with the Greek. *If killing were so easy, there'd be hardly anyone left alive*, he would have liked to reply. Whenever someone pointed out how easy a job would be, there were always complications. As was the case here – because of the Dream Couple, they had lost track of the exact location of the targets and were four hours behind schedule. The plateau was the only reference point they had left to watch out for the targets before they made their descent to the other side of the valley.

The Greek wished he were in the forest on his own.

– ... 1,167 metres, says Ruben, and shakes his head. Even with no wind that'd be risky.

– And then with this bad light, says Stina. It'll never work.

The Greek spits on the ground. He doesn't want to say it. But he says it:

– How old are you, actually?

He knows how old they are, where they come from, and what they've done. Before they can answer, the Greek continues:

– You're acting like children.

The Dream Couple doesn't react, they're not easily offended. This is their fourteenth assignment, they know they are a long way off being pros, but they already feel like gods who are able to cast judgment and mete out punishment. Since they've been travelling with the Greek, there has hardly been a conversation in which he hasn't made fun of them. They take it on the chin, because he's the Greek, and the Greek can do whatever he wants. And anyway, the Dream Couple enjoys the tension that exists between them. The Greek is twenty years older than them, but it's not a question of age. It's his status that creates the tension. Ruben had even forgiven him for the slap in the face. The Greek is a wolf, the Dream Couple are hyenas who want to be wolves.

– I'll bet five thousand, said Stina.

– Lira? asks Ruben, confused.

– Dollars, you idiot.

– I don't want your money, says the Greek.

– Then take Stina, says Ruben, laughing.

The Greek looks at him.

– And what if I want you?

Ruben's laughter dies down.

The Greek turns away and begins to set himself up on the ground. The Dream Couple also steps into gear. Ruben pins the photo of the targets at eye level on a tree, then he and Stina get changed and compare their clothes with the photo. Even the wigs have to be right. Details are important. At their final destination, two cameras will film everything, the deception has to be perfect.

– Blonde doesn't suit you, says Ruben.

Stina looks at herself in her little mirror and adjusts her wig.

– You have no idea what suits me, she replies.

In the meantime, the Greek has assembled his rifle and found the right position. The barrel is supported by a bipod, beneath which he has unfurled a felt blanket. The Greek himself is lying flat on his stomach and feels the tranquility of the forest rising through the earth and into his body. He likes this calm, the spot is perfect, the Greek could lie here all day long without this position getting uncomfortable. He slowly moves the barrel and looks through the scope. He has the opposite side of the valley in his sights. There is the plateau, the elevation is right, the angle is ideal. The Greek takes a look at his watch.

– Don't worry, says Ruben, it'll all work out.

The Greek takes a deep breath. There's nothing he hates more than being told to calm down by a child after the child has just messed up.

– Tighter, says Sina.

Ruben already has his mountain rescue service backpack on and is pulling Stina's straps tight. They are wearing the lightest models and have already tried them out by lugging two dead sheep

through the Belgian countryside in the backpacks the previous week. After Ruben has tightened the straps, Stina takes the photo from the tree and hands it to the Greek. He inspects it, looks at the Dream Couple, and then back at the photo.

– The cap, he says to Ruben, you’re wearing it the wrong way round.

– It looks cooler like this.

The Greek sets him straight.

– You have to wear it the way he wears it.

Ruben pulls a face and straightens the mariner’s cap.

This is the dumbest job I’ve ever done, thinks the Greek.

The Dream Couple sets off.

Their car is parked five kilometres away behind a dilapidated barn. After completing the assignment, they will meet there and drive to the nearest train station. From there, the Dream Couple will continue on south and arrive in Rome tomorrow morning, while the Greek will head to Berlin, where the next assignment is awaiting him.

Or so he hopes.

His gut feeling tells him otherwise.

The Dream Couple will try to take him out, and the Greek will end up burying them behind the run-down barn, which will cause him to miss his train and have to spend the night here in the forest. Ever since he slapped Ruben, the Greek has been observing the agitation in the eyes of the Dream Couple. It's a silent form of communication that excludes him. They are a long way off being finished with each other. The Greek wishes he had rejected the assignment right at the outset. All these years on his own, and now this.

So many things would be easier, I could...

The radio interrupts his thoughts.

The Greek hasn't moved a centimetre from his position lying on the ground and is so relaxed he feels like his body is part of the forest. An hour has gone by and the Dream Couple will have reached the suspension bridge. The Greek responds with three beeps, presses his eye against the rifle scope and directs his gaze at the plateau on the other side of the valley.

Focus.

He briefly shuts his eye, composes himself, and reopens it. Now he has visualised the targets on the opposite side of the valley and sees them step out of the bushes. He estimates their energy

levels and speculates as to their mood. He uses this visualisation to account for all possible eventualities in advance and prepares to take the first shot.

The information is scarce.

The targets are a man and a girl. The Greek doesn't know their names, and he's not interested in knowing them, because this isn't personal. Judging by the photos, they are athletic, but they will both be exhausted from the hike. Physically exhausted people have different reaction times to someone who is fresh and rested. The Greek imagines them reaching the plateau and being surprised when they catch sight of the Dream Couple waiting for them there. They won't even have the slightest hint of the Greek's presence, because he is more than a thousand metres from the action, a mere silent observer. But if something should go wrong, then the Greek will be there to set things straight. It's not a challenging job, but the Greek will be paid handsomely for it and is very happy that the hardest work will be carried out by the Dream Couple. It won't be easy for them to carry the corpses of the targets down the forest paths in their rescue backpacks. If everything goes according to plan, the Greek won't have to spring into action today. After the Dream Couple has left the plateau with the bodies, he will disassemble his rifle and pack it away, he will walk to the dilapidated barn and wait by the car. In the meantime, the dream couple will have reached their destination. They know the positions of the cameras and how they have to approach the cabin to avoid being filmed. First, they will bring the two corpses into the cabin through the side entrance, because the side entrance is in the blind spot of the security cameras. Then, the Dream Couple will go back out into the forest through the same side entrance, make a big arc and then enter the cabin through the front door, nice and visible for the cameras. They will turn on the lights, light up the fireplace, and wait for half an hour, before they ...

The Greek freezes.

It's almost as if his visualisation had manifested before his eyes – the bushes on the other side of the valley part and the targets step out onto the plateau.

Too early.

The Greek shuts his eye in front of the scope in disbelief, reopens it and suppresses the urge to swear.

Much too early.

He stays calm, he doesn't have to think, he reacts, checks the direction and strength of the wind, takes a look at the radio and decides against it, because there is nothing to discuss with the Dream Couple. They're more than half an hour away from the plateau. They'll never get there in time.

Focus.

The targets are now so close to the Greek that he can make out the beads of sweat glistening on their faces. They both look like they do in the photo that was taken four weeks ago. The girl with her long blonde hair and the grey-green jacket, the man in his vest and with the mariner's cap on his head.

The man goes first, the girl follows.

The Greek establishes a priority and focuses on the man.

The wind strength has changed, a headshot is out of the question, the Greek hesitates. Then the girl walks over to the edge of the plateau and laughs. The father asks her a question, the Greek understands every word. Not only does he master five languages, in his mid-twenties he taught himself to read lips, because Port Paris was of the opinion that it was indispensable for someone who works as an assassin and eliminates people at a distance. He turned out to be right. It had helped the Greek to better assess a situation and avoid errors on multiple occasions.

The father asks: What are you laughing at?

The girl answers: They're wearing the same clothes as us.

The father asks: Who?

The Greek thinks: *Shit, they've spotted the Dream Couple.*

The girl points down into the valley.

The father steps forward to get a better look.

The girl says: Down there, on the suspension bridge. Do you see them? He's wearing a mariner's cap like you, and she...

The girl moves back with a start, spins around and looks into the forest.

Please, not a third person, thinks the Greek.

The man also turns around, his rifle at the ready.

Now they both have their backs to the Greek. It's not ideal, but it's what he has – this brief moment before the targets disappear through the trees and down the trail, making them unreachable for the Dream Couple.

The Greek has no idea what the man is aiming at, but he chooses this very moment. The bullet pierces the man's back on the side of his heart and exits through his chest. A cloud of blood hovers between the targets.

The Greek moves the barrel a half a millimetre to the left.

The man looks at the girl.

The girl looks at the man.

The girl looks past the man.

The Greek freezes.

That's impossible.

The girl's gaze is directed right at him.

She can see me.

The Greek knows that's not possible.

As if she knows I'm lying on the ground a kilometre away.

The Greek blinks.

As if she knows what's about to happen next.

The second bullet starts its journey.

The dream couple has no idea who the targets are either. Port Paris has rules. Too much information influences the outcome, and the tool doesn't need to know what it's being used for, it just needs to work. The Greek never questions the assignment, and Port Paris likes that about him. The teacher and his student have grown closer over the decades, closer than plenty of fathers and sons, but there is still a distance that Port Paris can't shake off. Nobody wants to have a close relationship with the man they've trained to be a killer. Port Paris knows that the weapon he has created can be turned against him at any time. It'd be naïve not to think that. The Dream Couple, on the other hand, is in a different league. They are psychopaths, have no motivation of their own, they can be controlled.

Nobody controls the Greek.

On this day, the dream couple has quite a simple task – wait for the targets, eliminate them, and take their place. That's what the client wants. The Greek would never have agreed to that. He's no clown who dresses up in costumes. And it is with precisely this knowledge that Port Paris sold him the job: "That's not your thing, you're not some clown that dresses up, so let the kids do the work and you pocket the money."

Right now, the kids are in a bad mood. They are crossing the suspension bridge and wish they were somewhere else.

– Mallorca, says Stina.

– The Maldives, says Ruben.

– The Maldives?! What would you do on the Maldives?

– There are more than a thousand islands there.

– And?

– I want to scuba dive from one island to the other.

– Seriously?

– Seriously.

Stina looks down into the valley.

– I could puke she said.

– Okay, we don't have to go to the Maldives, says Ruben.

– I'm not talking about that.

She points at the countryside.

– Take a look around. A valley, a suspension bridge, forests, and rocks. This is the reason we left Norway; I really could puke.

Ruben stays silent. The landscape doesn't bother him. If he's being completely honest, he doesn't hate Norway much either and would happily go back. But he decides not to say that, because getting on the wrong side of Stina is never a good idea. The sex afterward is always terribly exhausting.

– And what do we do if they run away from us? asks Stina.

– Why would they do that?

– No idea. Maybe because we look like them.

Ruben laughs.

– They'll never realise that. You think too much.

– I think so much because I don't want to have to chase anyone.

Stina suddenly has a flashback of an overweight woman running barefoot down a side street.

– Do you remember how that diplomat in Krakow ran away from us? she asks.

Of course Ruben remembers.

– Man, she was fast!

Stina starts to laugh as well.

– How can fat people be so fast?

– It's the fear of dying, it releases energy.

Stina shakes her head, but it does her good to laugh a little.

– If our targets run on us, I'll freak out.

– Don't worry, we'll be cool, and they'll be cool. If something goes wrong, we can always chat to them.

– Chat?

– Ask them for directions or something.

– Ruben, if the Greek sees us having a chat with the targets, he'll probably blow our heads off right there and then.

– Maybe yours. He likes me.

Stina looks at him in astonishment.

– What makes you think he likes you?

– I have a nose for that kind of stuff, he ...

The shot interrupts Ruben mid-sentence.

The Dream Couple automatically ducks, as if the bullet had been meant for them.

– Fuck, says Ruben, when he realises what must have just happened.

The second shot echoes through the valley, and the dream couple runs off.

Nineteen minutes later they are standing on the plateau, breathless, and they can't believe what they're seeing.

– Fuck! Says Ruben again, throwing his mariner's cap onto the ground and jumping on it a few times. Fuck, fuck, fuck!

– Shut up, says Stina.

Ruben points around.

– Can you believe this?

– I believe it, but keep your mouth shut, I need to think.

While Stina is thinking, Ruben shields his eyes and looks over to the other side of the valley. He tries to work out where their camp had been. For a moment, he has the feeling that the Greek is observing him through his telescopic sight. Cautiously, Ruben raises his hand and waves.

He likes me, he thinks, I don't care what Stina says, the Greek likes me.

As if Stina had heard his thoughts, she slaps Ruben on the back of the head.

– What are you doing? she asks.

– Waving to him.

– He's long gone.

– What makes you so sure?

– You're still alive.

Stina gets out the radio.

The Greek is standing in front of the dilapidated barn stashing the bag with the rifle in the boot of the rental car when the radio pipes up. For a moment, he doesn't want to respond. He imagines getting into the car and driving away.

It would make so many things easier.

He presses the button to talk and says:

– You were too late.

– They're not here, says Stina.

– What?!

– There is blood and---

– Two shots, the Greek interrupts her.

– I know, we heard the shots, but---

There is a rustling on the other end, then Ruben says:

– Is there any chance you might have missed?

The Greek regrets having picked up the radio.

– I do *not* miss, he says calmly.

– Well, where are they, then?

– Put Stina back on.

– Why?

– Because I don't feel like talking to you.

There's a rustling sound, Stina says:

– You’ve hurt Ruben’s feelings.

– Listen, Stina. Two shots, two hits, understood?

– But they’re not here.

The Greek takes a deep breath, and then says:

– Stay right where you are.

When the Greek reaches the plateau, the Dream Couple is sitting on one of the rocks, calling to mind two teenagers that have been caught shoplifting. Stina has her legs stretched out in front of her and is chewing gum, Ruben is wearing the mariner's cap backwards again and looks like a small-time crook from a silent film. The Greek doesn't say a word to them, he's in a foul mood, and his pulse takes a while to settle down after making the ascent. He wishes Port Paris were there to see this mess with his own eyes. *Easy money my ass*, the Greek thinks, and goes to the spot where he last saw the targets.

There's a rifle and the two backpacks.

– There are tracks everywhere, says Ruben behind him, but they don't lead anywhere.

– We've searched the edge of the forest as well, says Stina. They're nowhere to be found.

The Greek looks up, expecting to see carrion crows in the treetops.

– They're not up there either, says Ruben.

– I know they're not up there, growls the Greek, because I killed them.

– Head? asks Ruben.

– Heart, answers the Greek.

The dream couple exchange a quick glance. They know what the assignment was – the targets were to be taken out with headshots. Because criticism would be inappropriate, Stina asks:

– Why not headshots?

– I wanted a sure hit.

– Was it the wind?

The Greek nods, Stina raises her fist.

– I knew it, she says, satisfied.

The Greek looks over at the other side of the valley and recalls the seconds that passed after the first shot – the way the man’s heart exploded out of his chest, how the cloud of blood enveloped the girl, and then the look in her eyes. She stared at him and knew what would come next. Before the cloud of blood had dissipated, the second bullet pierced her chest, and the girl was knocked off her feet.

The Greek shuts his eyes.

He sees her lying there.

He sees her just lying there.

The end.

The Greek turns away from the valley and looks at the ground. At the spot where the targets fell, the soil seems to be untouched. Someone had clearly made an effort to erase all the traces. The Greek runs his hand through the grass. A thin film of blood is left on his fingertips.

He turns to the backpacks.

The entry hole is clearly visible on one backpack, but the exit hole is missing from the other. The Greek knows that with the munition he used, that’s impossible. The bullet would have exited through the girl’s back without a doubt.

The Greek looks around.

Where are you?

– ... a bear.

– What?

– I was just saying, maybe it was a bear, repeats Ruben.

– A bear that covers its tracks? the Greek retorts.

Ruben shrugs his shoulders.

– That'd be a new one, says Stina, laughing.

The Greek has no idea how she can laugh in a situation like this. He takes a look at his watch.

– You two don't have much time.

– We'll make it, says Stina.

– Just like you made it here on time?

The Dream Couple says nothing.

– Take their backpacks and their rifles.

– What about the bodies? Stina wants to know.

– Leave the mountain rescue backpacks here. I'll bring you the bodies.

Ruben doesn't understand.

– But ---

– Whatever happens, the Greek interrupts him, we stick to the plan. You need to be at the cabin before nightfall. Don't screw that up. I'll follow you as soon as I've found them.

With that, he sends them on their way.

He shouldn't have sent them away.

It is the most fatal mistake the Greek has made in his long career.

* * * *

