THE LAST MAN IN NARVIK

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Timothy Brits

CHAPTER 1

The Invasion

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The morning of April the ninth began the way most mornings began in Narvik that time of year: grey sky, cold coming off the fjord, the smell of fish and diesel and the particular damp that never quite left the harbour no matter how long the summer ran.

I was on the dock at half past six, helping my father load ice into the hold of the *Sigrid*, the boat he had worked since before I was born. She was an old thing by then, her hull repainted so many times the layers had begun to crack at the seams, but my father maintained that a boat, like a man, was mostly in the engine. The engine on the *Sigrid* was twenty-three years old and had never missed a season. He spoke of this the way he

spoke of most things he was proud of, which is to say not at all, but the fact of it came up whenever anyone suggested it might be time to think about a newer vessel.

"You're going to sleep through your whole life if you keep those hours," he said, not looking up from the ice.

"It was barely midnight."

"Barely midnight is midnight."

He was a compact man, my father, built low and solid the way men get who spend their lives on water. He had shrapnel in his left leg from the last war, a German souvenir he carried without complaint, though on cold mornings like this one I could see the slight favouring of it in the way he moved. He had come back from that war quieter than he had left, or so my mother said. I only knew the quiet version. He did not talk about the war, not ever, not even when I had pressed him as a boy. He would simply look at me with an expression I had not been able to read then and can read now without difficulty, and change the subject.

I had been avoiding the boat for two months. Not from any reason I could properly name — I had grown up on it, knew its rhythms the way I knew my own — but at twenty-four I had developed the young man's conviction that a life spent following your father's footsteps was a life somehow not your own. I was going to do something with languages. I had been teaching myself more English from the books my mother kept on the shelf in the sitting room, planning vaguely toward the mainland, toward a city, toward some future that had not yet taken a specific shape but felt important to aim at regardless.

Trondheim, maybe. Bergen. Somewhere the world was larger than the fjord.

"You going out today?" I asked.

"Weather's decent. Three, four hours." He straightened and looked at me with the appraising expression he had for things he was going to say carefully. "You could come."

"Maybe next week."

He made a sound that was not quite a response and returned to the ice. This was how we negotiated, my father and I — through the things not said and the sounds not quite meaning nothing. We were fond of each other without being very good at expressing it, which I have since come to understand is a common arrangement between fathers and sons and does not prevent the fondness from being real.

The harbour was coming alive around us. Other boats preparing to go out, men exchanging the short practical speech of people with work to do. A boy of about twelve was hauling rope on the dock two berths down, struggling with the weight and refusing to show it. The water in the fjord lay dark and still, the mountains on the far side lost in low cloud, their peaks invisible this morning. It was the kind of day that closed down around you — not threatening, just grey and near, the whole world reduced to this dock, this boat, this cold.

When the ice was loaded, I helped fasten the hatch cover and coiled a length of rope my father handed me without instruction. These were things I still knew how to do without thinking, whatever else I had been telling myself about the direction of my life.

"There's bread inside," he said. "Your mother left it."

"I'll get something at the café."

He nodded. He did not look at me again as I walked back up toward the town, but I heard the *Sigrid's* engine turn over — the reliable, unhurried sound of it — before I reached the top of the dock stairs.

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Kristian was at his corner table in Andersen's café with his enormous hands wrapped around a coffee cup, reading a newspaper with the focused frown he applied to things he disagreed with, which was most things in print. He had been this way since September, when Germany had moved on Poland and the Norwegian papers had filled with the kind of careful diplomatic language that says, without saying it, that we hope the fire will not come this far.

Kristian Olsen had been my closest friend since we were seven years old and he had pushed me into the fjord on a dare and then jumped in after me because the water was cold and he decided we should suffer together. He was three years older than me, broad across the shoulders, built for physical work though his mind was quicker than his size suggested. He had grown up reading everything he could find and retained it all in a way I envied, which meant he knew things about military history and naval architecture and geopolitics that most people in Narvik had no particular reason to know. Over the past year this had made him the most unwelcome man at any social gathering, since he could not stop correlating what he knew

with what the papers were saying and arriving at conclusions nobody wanted to hear.

"Anything interesting?" I asked, sitting down across from him.

He turned the paper around so I could see the front page. Swedish foreign minister, expression of continued confidence in Norwegian neutrality. "The Swedes say there's no cause for alarm."

"Which means there's cause for alarm," I said.

"Obviously." He turned the paper back. "They've been saying some version of that since September and they've been wrong since September."

"You've been saying that since September."

"And I've been right since September." He folded the paper with a kind of controlled violence. "The Germans are moving iron ore through these waters. British ships are patrolling. At some point someone decides they cannot allow the other to continue doing what they're doing and then everyone acts surprised when it stops being theoretical."

I ordered coffee from young Petra, who was Andersen's daughter and had been bringing me coffee in this café since I was old enough to come in alone. She set it down without ceremony, the way she set down everything, and went back to whatever she had been doing before.

Outside, the street was doing what the harbour had been doing — the ordinary work of an ordinary morning, a Tuesday in April, nothing to suggest that anything was different from any other Tuesday in April. A man was arguing pleasantly with

the butcher's wife about the price of something. Two older women were walking arm in arm toward the market, moving slowly enough to suggest they were not primarily interested in reaching it. A boy on a bicycle nearly took out a display of vegetables outside the greengrocer's and did not look back to see what damage he had done.

I was halfway through my coffee when Andersen turned up the volume on the radio behind the counter.

He did it because the broadcaster's voice had changed. Not in content yet — it was still the regular morning programme — but in quality, a slight tightening that you felt before you understood it. Andersen heard it, and I watched his hand move to the volume dial by instinct, the way you turn toward a sound you haven't yet identified.

The interruption came at eight twenty-three. I know the time because Andersen checked his watch every fifteen minutes as though confirming that time was still behaving itself, and he had just done so.

German forces had invaded Norway. Naval vessels were moving on Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Narvik. Troops were landing. The government was calling on all Norwegians to resist.

The café went absolutely still.

Not silent — the radio continued, the broadcaster reading words in a voice that was barely holding together, and outside through the window the man and the butcher's wife were still talking, not yet knowing — but everything inside the café became motionless, as though the air itself had changed consistency.

The broadcaster continued. German warships in Oslofjord. The fortress guns at Oscarsborg had opened fire.

"The *Blücher*," Kristian said. His voice was completely level.

Halvard, who ran the hardware store two doors down and had come in for his morning coffee, turned to look at us from the next table. "What?"

"The Blücher is the lead ship." Kristian was staring at the radio. He had set down his coffee cup without looking at it, placed it precisely in the centre of its saucer. "Heavy cruiser. Eight thousand tonnes. Flagship of the operation. If they're moving on Oslo by sea, she'll be at the head of the column."

"What of it?"

"Oscarsborg has Krupp guns. Naval guns, thirty, forty years old. Built in the last century for exactly this." He paused. "They were built to stop exactly this kind of vessel."

Halvard made a sceptical noise about the odds of century-old coastal guns against the modern German navy. I noticed that he said it quietly, and that he had not resumed drinking his coffee.

The broadcaster stopped. Static, brief and wrong. Then, after a pause that occupied more space than its actual duration warranted:

The heavy cruiser Blücher has been struck by fire from Oscarsborg Fortress. Repeat — the Blücher has been struck.

A woman near the window made a sound. Old Fru Bakken, who came in every morning and always sat in the same chair

and had been doing so since her husband died eight years ago. It was a very small sound and it went through the room like something much larger.

Nobody moved.

Andersen was gripping the edge of the counter. Petra had come back from wherever she had been and was standing in the kitchen doorway. Young Gunnar, who delivered supplies for Andersen on Tuesday mornings and had clearly just arrived because he still had his coat on, stood in the door with a crate of eggs and did not come in or go back out.

Multiple hits have been reported. The vessel appears to be listing—

The broadcaster stopped again. A longer pause this time, or it felt longer. Outside, the man and the butcher's wife had stopped talking.

The Blücher has sunk. The German cruiser Blücher has sunk in Oslofjord.

Kristian stood up. Slowly, with his full height, like a building being constructed. His coffee cup was still in his hand. He looked at it, then set it down on the table with great precision, as though the placement mattered, and looked at the radio.

"Eight thousand tonnes," he said, quietly, to the room or to himself. "They sank an eight thousand tonne warship with guns that were old before my father was born."

I was already on my feet. The café had come unfrozen — people were talking over each other now, some moving toward the door, Halvard had his hand over his mouth, Andersen was

saying something to Petra that I couldn't hear. Fru Bakken was still in her chair, very still, with the particular stillness of someone who has been through one of these before and knows that the room will reorganise itself around the information given enough time.

I pushed through to the street.

The morning was the same morning it had been fifteen minutes ago. The same grey sky. The same cold. The same smell of the fjord two blocks away. The man who had been arguing with the butcher's wife was standing in the middle of the street holding a paper bag and looking at nothing in particular. The two older women had stopped walking and were speaking to each other in low voices, close together.

The *Sigrid* was still at its moorings. My father would still be in the hold, or would have been before the news found him.

Kristian appeared beside me.

We stood there for a moment. He rubbed the back of his neck once, hard, the thinking gesture that I had been watching him make for seventeen years.

"We're going to fight," he said.

It was not quite a question, but it was not quite a statement either. It was the kind of sentence that requires the other person to complete it by agreeing.

"Yes," I said.

We found my father coming up from the dock faster than his leg usually allowed, having heard the news from a fisherman on the next berth who had a radio on his boat. His

face was the face of a man translating something he had already lived once into a language he had hoped never to be required to speak again. He looked at me and then at Kristian and then back at me, and in the look was a whole history I did not have access to yet — the particular knowledge of what comes next that belongs only to men who have been there.

"Where will you report?" he asked.

"The garrison. Or wherever Haugen's people are assembling."

He nodded once. He pulled the keys to the *Sigrid* from his pocket, turned them over in his hand without looking at them, and put them back. I do not know what the gesture meant to him. It meant something.

"Come home first," he said. "Your mother will want to say goodbye."

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It was not a long goodbye. My mother had grown up in a family that had sent men off to the last war and she had the particular practicality of women who know that prolonged farewells accomplish nothing and cost more than they are worth. She fed us breakfast, both of us, because Kristian's family was in Trondheim and there was no question that he would sit at our table. She worked at the stove with focused efficiency and asked no questions about where we were going or what we expected to find when we got there.

She had made bread that morning, before the news. The loaves were on the counter and the kitchen smelled of them,

and that smell, which was simply the smell of our kitchen, struck me as something I wanted to remember. I noted it deliberately, which I had never done before, which is how I knew something had changed.

When we got up to leave, she packed the rest of the bread for us without comment. She held my face in both hands for a moment and looked at me the way she sometimes did when she was making a record of something.

"Come back," she said. Just that.

My father walked with us as far as the end of the street. At the corner — the same corner where I had met Kristian every morning of our school years, where Kristian had been waiting the first day he decided we were friends, which he had apparently decided unilaterally and I had simply gone along with — my father stopped.

I looked back once. He raised a hand.

That was the last time I saw him looking the way I was used to him looking, which is to say like a man whose sons were still safe.

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We did not reach the main garrison that morning. German forces were already moving on Narvik, and the organised chaos of mobilisation pulled us into a column heading north toward a defensive position in the mountains before any formal reporting could take place. The column moved fast and quiet through the pale April morning, men carrying what they could

and leaving behind what they couldn't, the town falling away behind us as the road climbed into the tree line.

I remember looking back once. Narvik from the slope above it was smaller than it seemed from inside it — the dock, the harbour, the streets I had walked every morning of my life. The *Sigrid* was a dark shape among the other boats at her berth. My father would have put back out by now, or wouldn't, depending on what he had heard and what he had decided to do about it. I did not know which, and would not know for a long time.

Three days later I was Corporal Solberg and Kristian was Private Olsen, attached to Lieutenant Haugen's platoon on the northern ridge, holding a line against an enemy that kept arriving in greater numbers than anything the defensive plans had accounted for.

Haugen was a careful officer, not cautious in the way that was another word for afraid but deliberate, thorough, the kind of man who checked his maps twice and his ammunition three times and never gave an order until he had considered what would happen after it was followed. He had been regular army for twelve years and it showed in the way he moved through terrain, always angled toward cover, always with a sense of where the exits were. He communicated with his men in the stripped-down practical language of someone for whom words were tools and not ornaments, which took some adjustment if you were used to a different register but turned out to be its own form of clarity.

On the second day he called me to his position with a map already spread across a flat rock.

"Your English," he said.

"My father traded with Scottish merchants. I learned from books as well."

He looked at the map rather than at me. "We may be coordinating with British forces. If that happens, I want you where that coordination happens." He folded the map with the careful precision he applied to everything. "Until then you're with Kristian's section on the eastern approach. You know these ridges?"

"Well enough."

"Better than well enough," Kristian said from behind me. He had apparently followed me over without being invited, which was characteristic. "We hunted on this ground. Both of us."

Haugen looked at him for a moment. "Then you're both on the eastern approach." He picked up the map. "Questions?"

There were none.

The country we were defending did not cooperate with the Germans. The mountains above Narvik were steep and broken, the forest dense on the lower slopes, the ridgelines offering clean fields of fire to men who had grown up on them. What we lacked in equipment and numbers we partly made up in ground. Partly. The Germans were well-armed, methodical, and they had the advantage of knowing they were winning, which is its own form of momentum. They were patient in a way that suggested they were not in any particular hurry, which was more unnerving than aggression would have been.

Sergeant Dahl arrived at our position on the fourth day as though he had always been assigned there and someone had

simply neglected to inform us. He was a compact, weathered man in his forties who moved with the efficiency of someone who had learned long ago that wasted energy compounded into exhaustion faster than any enemy could manage, and wasted words compounded into misunderstanding. He had apparently concluded from these observations that the correct approach was to eliminate as much of both as possible. He deployed his light machine gun on its tripod without ceremony, checked the sight picture, and began scanning the ridge to the east as though the scanning were what he had come here to do and everything else was incidental.

Kristian observed him for about thirty seconds. "That's Dahl," he said to me, not to him. "Sergeant Dahl, from the third. Fought in the border operations in the twenties."

Dahl did not confirm or deny this. "Two of you stop discussing me and start watching that ridge," he said. "There are seven of them working their way up the eastern approach and they know we're here."

He was right about the number. He was generally right about the things he stated as fact, which I came to understand was because he had a strict internal rule against stating things as fact unless he was confident they were. Everything else he said as possibility or estimate, clearly marked as such. This made him reliable in a way that was hard to put a value on until you had spent enough time in situations where unreliability cost you things you could not get back.

Kristian found him irritating, which was partly because Kristian found most forms of extreme self-containment irritating, and partly because Dahl's manner implied, without

meaning to, that having strong opinions about everything was a symptom of not having thought carefully about anything. This was not entirely fair to Kristian, whose opinions were generally well-founded. It was not entirely unfair either.

They argued twice in those first weeks, properly, the kind of argument that has real stakes underneath the surface one. The first was about the defensibility of a particular position on the upper slope, which Kristian thought could be held and Dahl thought was a trap, and Dahl turned out to be right when a flanking manoeuvre from the northeast made it untenable within six hours. The second was about whether to pull back to a prepared position when the ammunition ran low or hold and wait for resupply, which Kristian thought was too defeatist and Dahl thought was basic arithmetic. Dahl was right again.

After the second argument, Kristian was quiet for a day, which was unusual enough that I asked him about it.

"He's right," he said, as though this were the most irritating thing anyone had ever done to him. "He's right about most of the practical things."

"And?"

"And it doesn't mean he isn't also wrong about things that don't show up on his map."

I understood what he meant. Dahl's calculations were reliable precisely because they excluded what could not be calculated — what people would endure past the point of reason, why they would fight past the point of tactical sense, what the land meant to the men who had been born on it. These were not things that appeared in ammunition counts or sight

lines, but they were real, and on enough occasions in the weeks that followed they turned out to be the deciding factor.

The three of us held that ridge for eleven days, which was longer than it had any right to be held.

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It had been like this for weeks. Skirmish after skirmish, our small platoon holding ground against the advancing Germans. We all knew what was happening: Norway was falling, piece by piece, the way a coastline erodes when the weather turns against it — not all at once but persistently, inch by inch, the line retreating and retreating until you look back and the thing you were standing on is gone.

The days developed their own rhythm, which is to say they lost the distinction between days. You watched a ridgeline until your eyes ached. You moved positions in the dark and slept when you could and ate what was available, which was less each week. You learned which sounds were worth reacting to and which were the mountain settling in the cold or a branch coming down in the wind, and you made this distinction in your sleep, and sometimes you were wrong and jolted awake to silence, heart hammering, your hand on the rifle before you were conscious.

From my position on the ridge I could see the fjord below, its dark waters unnaturally calm amid the chaos of battle. It seemed almost offensive, that stillness. The same water, the same cold, the same mountains reflecting in it that had always reflected there, as though the landscape had decided not to

participate in what the men on it were doing to each other. In the mornings, mist sometimes came off the water and climbed the lower slopes, and for a few minutes before it burned off you could not see the fjord at all, which was in some ways easier.

The first man I killed clearly, not in the confusion of a firefight but with deliberate aim and certain knowledge of the outcome, I remember in precise detail. He was crossing an open stretch of slope two hundred metres below our position, moving fast and low, probably confident that the broken ground gave him more cover than it did. I tracked him for thirty metres, led the sight correctly, and fired once. He went down and did not move and I watched him for a long time to make sure.

I felt nothing. This was the strange part. There was a distant intellectual acknowledgment that I had ended a life, and there was a physical reaction — hands steadier than they had any right to be, a slowing of the pulse rather than an acceleration, the calm that arrived when everything became very simple — but nothing that resembled the emotions I would have expected. I had been afraid of this, in the weeks before the first time. I had wondered whether I would freeze, whether the knowledge of what I was doing would prevent me from doing it, whether I was capable of it. The answer turned out to be yes, and the absence of the feeling I had expected turned out to be more disturbing than the feeling would have been.

I mentioned it to Dahl that night, because he was the only person on the ridge whose opinion I trusted on the subject, and because he seemed like a man unlikely to be unsettled by the question.

He was quiet for a moment. “What did you feel?”

“Nothing. That’s what I’m telling you.”

“Then that’s what there is.” He looked at the ridge. “It doesn’t mean what you think it means. It doesn’t mean you’ve become someone who doesn’t feel things. It means you’re still functional.” He shifted his position on the log. “The feelings find you later. That’s when you have to be careful.”

I thought about this for a long time after. He was right, as he generally was.

On a morning in late April, cold still biting through my worn uniform, a bullet splintered a tree ten centimetres from my head. I pressed myself deeper into the snow, feeling it seep through to my bones. My Krag-Jørgensen was in my hands — an M1894, old and scarred and reliable, the rifle of the previous generation’s army. We were fighting with the tools of the last war and the determination of this one, which would have to be enough.

“Solberg! Position!” Lieutenant Haugen’s voice carried through the thin mountain air, barely audible above the crack and chatter of the firefight.

“Northwestern ridge, sir!” I called back. My breath was visible in the chill. “I count seven moving up the eastern approach.”

Beside me, Kristian was returning fire and reloading with the mechanical focus of a man who had entered a mental state where thought and action had merged into something below thought. The big shoulders working the bolt without looking at

it. His face flat in a way that was very unlike his usual face. He was not thinking. He was just shooting.

He reloaded and glanced sideways at me. “Do you think your British friends will actually come to our aid?”

There was a bitter edge in his voice that had not been there a month ago. His optimism had been the first casualty of this war — not eroded but demolished, the way a wall holds until suddenly it doesn’t and is simply gone. He was not a pessimist now so much as a man who had placed his weight on something and felt it give way and was still in the process of adjusting his balance.

“They’ll come,” I said, because I still half-believed it, and because the alternative to believing it was to accept certain things about our situation that I was not yet ready to accept.

He loaded a round without reply. His breath was coming fast and even and controlled, the breathing of a man who had been doing this long enough to breathe correctly.

“Did you hear about the Blücher?” he said after a moment, checking his sights.

“We were there when we heard.”

“I know. I keep thinking about it anyway.” He tracked something on the slope and did not fire — too far, not worth the ammunition. “An old coastal fortress with guns from the last century, and they put an eight thousand tonne warship on the bottom of the fjord with them. With guns that were old when our fathers were young.”

A rare, brief smile crossed his dirt-streaked face. He mimed an explosion with his hands — the gesture was entirely

characteristic of him, the physicality that he could not stop expressing even in this place, even in this moment — and then rubbed his hands together and seemed to notice for the first time how cold they had become.

"A thousand Germans taking an April swim," he said.

"Save the celebration," Dahl said, from two metres to our right, where he had appeared without either of us hearing him. He settled behind the machine gun's stock and began scanning. "The Blücher was one ship. The Nazis have many more." A pause. He kept scanning, unhurried. "That said. A coastal fortress doing the job it was built to do. Sometimes the old ways still work."

From Dahl, this was practically a speech.

The radio in Kristian's pack crackled: *Reinforcements coming up from the south. Hold position. Over.*

"British?" I asked, already knowing from the code sequence that preceded the message.

His face hardened as he listened. "Norwegian. The British are otherwise engaged."

A bitter laugh escaped me before I could stop it. "Of course they are."

I turned my attention back to the ridge and tried to ignore the hollow feeling settling in my gut. Whispers had been circulating among the men for days. Of allies reconsidering their commitments. An evacuation being planned from the harbour. Of Norwegians being left behind to whatever calculation the Germans had in mind for a defeated people.

I did not want to believe it. I kept not wanting to believe it, which is not the same thing as not believing it, and I knew the difference.

Another volley erupted from the German positions below. We pressed flat. The ground shuddered as mortar rounds exploded metres away — close enough that I felt the concussion in my chest like something internal rearranging itself. The sound arrived after the feeling, which was always the wrong order. My ears rang. I tasted dirt and pine resin and the cold metal smell of the snow.

When it cleared I checked Kristian, then Dahl. Everyone present.

Through my rifle sight I spotted movement: a German soldier breaking cover, pushing forward at a low run. I inhaled slowly. The world compressed down to the familiar single point of aim. I pulled the trigger and felt the rifle kick against my shoulder. He dropped mid-stride.

I felt nothing watching him fall. I noted this, as I had noted it before, and returned to the ridge.

We did that. Norwegians did that. The Blücher kept running through my mind. Not as triumph but as evidence. Evidence that we were not simply helpless, not simply the smaller thing being consumed by the larger thing. Old guns, old fortress, men who knew the water they were defending. Maybe we were not as outmatched as the numbers suggested. Not here, not in our own country, not on ground we had known all our lives. The Germans had numbers and equipment and the momentum of a campaign that had gone well for them across most of Europe, but they did not have these mountains and

they did not have this cold and they did not know these ridgelines the way we knew them. They could not know them. You had to have grown up here. You had to have carried them in you for your whole life before any of this started.

The thought had barely taken shape when German mortar shells whistled in and demolished the position we had just left. The trees where we had been were gone, replaced by a hole in the frozen ground and the smell of cordite and scorched wood drifting toward us on the cold air.

Haugen's voice came over the radio. "They're flanking hard east. Kristian, Solberg, reposition to cover the approach. Dahl, suppressing fire on my command."

We moved through the trees in a low crouch, pine branches dumping snow on us as we pushed through. The forest here smelled of cold and resin and the faint ghost of the mortar smoke drifting over from behind us. We moved without speaking, navigating by the landmarks we had memorised in the first days on this position — the split boulder, the lightning-struck pine, the dry streambed that would become a channel when the snow melted and was still just a shallow depression in the white.

Behind us, Dahl's machine gun opened up. Controlled, metered bursts, covering us with exactly what was required and nothing more.

We reached the new position — a natural depression behind a shelf of rock overlooking the eastern approach — and I pressed my back against the stone and looked at Kristian. He was breathing hard from the run, which he would not

acknowledge, and there was blood on his sleeve from somewhere he had also not yet acknowledged. He met my eyes.

Neither of us said anything.

There was nothing that needed to be said. We had both understood what we were here for from the moment we walked away from my parents' house, and each day that passed made that understanding more specific, more expensive, and more certain. The fjord was still down there below us, the same impossible stillness it had maintained through all of this, and somewhere under its dark water was the *Blücher*, which was the answer we had already given once to the question of what happened when someone came to take Norway from us.

We had answered it once. We would keep answering it for as long as we were standing.

I made a silent promise to myself: no matter what comes next, I will not abandon this fight.

Not while Norway still needs its sons.

CHAPTER 2

Fighting Alongside Allies

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The British arrived three days after we secured the northern ridge. They came not as saviours but as equals — tired men in uniforms much like our own, their faces carrying the same weariness I saw each morning in my shaving mirror. They had been fighting too, somewhere to the south, and it showed in the careful way they moved and the economy with which they used words.

Captain William Blackwood did not waste time with formalities. The moment his boots hit Norwegian soil, he unfurled maps across Lieutenant Haugen's makeshift command table, his fingers moving with the quiet confidence of a man who had done this before and expected to do it again.

"The Germans have established artillery positions here and here," he said, his English accent crisp against the mountain silence. "Our intelligence suggests they're planning to push through this valley within forty-eight hours."

I stood at attention behind Lieutenant Haugen, translating where needed. Haugen's English was functional for orders and reports but lost its footing in the kind of rapid, technically specific exchange that Blackwood favoured — the clipped shorthand of an officer used to other officers who shared his vocabulary. I watched the moments when Haugen's face tightened slightly, the way it did when he was working to follow something that was moving faster than his comprehension, and I stepped in before he had to ask.

Blackwood's eyes found mine at one point and held them.

"You speak English well, soldier."

"My father traded fish with Scottish merchants, sir. I learned as a boy."

Something shifted in his expression — not quite respect, but the precursor to it. "And your name?"

"Corporal Erik Solberg, sir."

"Solberg knows these mountains better than any man in the company," Haugen said. "He can guide your men through terrain the Germans would consider impassable."

Blackwood studied me for a moment longer than was comfortable, as though weighing something that had nothing to do with the maps in front of him. Then he looked back at Haugen.

"The German artillery position here." He tapped the map. "Can it be approached from the north face?"

Haugen looked to me. I studied the position. "That's above the tree line from five hundred metres up. Exposed. The western approach is longer but it has cover almost to the guns."

Blackwood tilted his head. "The western approach isn't on my map."

"It isn't a road," I said. "It's a shepherd's path. Very old. Barely visible if you don't know to look for it."

He was quiet for a moment. Then, to Haugen: "I'd like to use Corporal Solberg in a coordinating capacity going forward. His language skills and local knowledge are both relevant."

Haugen's expression was carefully neutral. "I'll need him available for my own operations, Captain."

"Of course." Blackwood's tone was pleasant and entirely unmoved. He was, I came to understand over the following weeks, a man who got what he wanted through the very effective tactic of never appearing to want anything particularly. "A shared arrangement. My operations won't conflict with yours."

He said it with complete confidence, which I supposed was what came from having a navy and an air force.

Haugen agreed. He did not look especially happy about it, but he had fought this war long enough to understand that the British resources Blackwood represented were not something to be quarrelled with over protocol.

As we left the command tent, I fell into step beside Haugen, who said nothing for fifty metres. Then, without looking at me: "Don't let them use you as a translator when they want to leave us out of a conversation. If Blackwood says something to his officers that you understand and we should know, I expect to hear it."

"Yes, sir."

He gave me a brief, direct look. "Good."

• • •

That night, huddled around a small fire carefully shielded from enemy view, I found Kristian waiting with the particular stillness that meant he had been working himself up to say something.

The firelight caught the lines tiredness had carved into his face over the past weeks — deeper than they had any right to be on a man his age. Across the camp, the British soldiers had established their own fires at what was not quite a deliberate distance but felt like one. The two groups coexisted with the carefully maintained indifference of men who were politely uncertain about each other.

"So you're running errands for the British now," Kristian said. Not a question.

"I'm following orders," I replied, stirring the thin stew in my mess tin. "Same as you."

"Haugen's orders, or Blackwood's?"

"Both, apparently."

He looked across the camp at the British fires. One of the British soldiers had produced a harmonica, and the thin sound of it drifted across the gap between the groups — something slow and minor-keyed that I didn't recognise. A few of the Norwegian men were listening without appearing to listen.

"They've been here three days and they already have a musician," Kristian said. "We've been here three weeks and we have Dahl."

"Dahl is more useful than a harmonica."

"That's a low standard."

Sergeant Dahl arrived and settled beside us, cradling a tin mug of coffee so weak it was barely coloured. He had the habit of appearing at conversations that concerned him without any particular explanation of how he had known to appear.

"The British have resources we don't," he said, as though continuing a discussion that had been underway. "Artillery, air support when the weather permits. We'd be fools not to work with them."

"I'm not saying don't work with them," Kristian said. "I'm saying know what the arrangement actually is. They need us more than they're admitting. Without Norwegian guides, without men who know this terrain, they're fighting blind in country that was going to kill them well before the Germans got a chance to."

"True," Dahl said. "Which is why they're working with us."

"Which is why they're using us," Kristian replied. "There's a difference."

Dahl considered this with the unhurried seriousness he brought to most things. “Not a useful difference, right now.”

The harmonica continued across the camp. A British soldier I didn’t recognise walked over to our fire, stopped at a respectful distance, and held up a bar of chocolate. His Norwegian was nonexistent; he communicated primarily through the universal language of holding out something valuable and raising his eyebrows.

Kristian took the chocolate with the minimum of ceremony that still qualified as courtesy, broke off a piece, and handed it back. The soldier nodded, looked briefly at the rest of us, and went back to his side of the camp.

“Right,” Kristian said, looking at the chocolate. “So they’re not completely useless.”

“Cigarettes too,” Dahl said. “Better than ours.”

Kristian ate his piece of chocolate. I watched his expression change slightly — the flavour arriving, real chocolate, something none of us had had in weeks — and then go carefully neutral again.

“My loyalty is to Norway,” I said. “It’s never been anywhere else.”

Kristian looked at me steadily. “I know that. I’m not questioning your loyalty. I’m questioning theirs.” He flicked a glance toward the British fires. “They’re here because it’s strategically useful to be here. The day it’s not useful anymore, they’ll leave. I want to know you’ve thought about that.”

I had thought about it. I kept not being able to find a satisfying answer to it.

"Then we make ourselves indispensable for as long as possible," I said.

He held my gaze for a moment. "That's not an answer, Erik."

He was right, and we both knew it, and there was nothing useful to add to that, so we sat with the fire and the distant harmonica and finished our stew.

• • •

Dawn found me at Captain Blackwood's tent, my breath forming clouds in the frigid air. The mountains above the camp were beginning to separate from the sky, the peaks losing their darkness as the first light found them, turning pink and then gold at the very tops while the lower slopes were still in grey shadow. It was the kind of morning that looked magnificent from inside a building. On the slope it was simply cold.

Two British soldiers emerged from the tent behind Blackwood. The first was Sergeant Mills — broad-shouldered, with a scar along his jaw that he wore with the unconscious ease of someone who had stopped noticing it years ago. He had the manner of a man who had learned to read people quickly or had paid for the failure to do so, and I felt his assessment of me before he said anything.

The second was Private Cooper. He was younger than I had expected — perhaps twenty, perhaps slightly less — with the alert, slightly-too-awake eyes of someone who had seen enough to know that alertness was worth the effort. He had the build of someone who had been strong before rationing and was still

strong, just differently. He stood with the patient readiness of a man who had made peace with not knowing what would be required of him in the next hour.

"Solberg," Blackwood said. "These men tell me you know a route that gives us eyes on the German forward position without exposing ourselves."

"Yes, sir. There's a shepherd's path above the eastern ridge. Narrow, but it'll take us where we need to go."

Mills looked me over with his unhurried assessment. "Ever been shot at before yesterday, lad?"

"More times than I'd like in the past month, Sergeant."

A smile broke through his expression. "Good enough for me, Captain."

• • •

We set out as the first light pierced the valley. The mountains were turning gold above us, the fjord below a mirror of the sky's slow brightening. Moving single file along a path my grandfather had likely walked, in a country I had known all my life, I could almost forget why we were there. Almost. The rifle slung across my back and the sound of Blackwood's controlled breathing behind me tended to make forgetting difficult.

The path narrowed as we climbed, forcing us into a line — me at the front, Cooper behind, then Mills, with Blackwood bringing up the rear. The only sounds were our breathing and the occasional scrape of a boot on loose stone. The wind came

off the ridge in cold, periodic gusts, carrying the particular smell of high ground in late spring — snow still on the peaks, the first green beginning below, a clean and indifferent smell that had nothing to do with what we were doing on this slope.

I set the pace deliberately. Fast enough to make the timing work, slow enough that nobody's breathing became a problem on the steep sections. Behind me, Cooper matched it without complaint. He moved quietly for a British soldier — better than I had expected. He watched where he placed his feet and didn't crowd my heels, which are the two things that matter on steep ground and which men who learned their mountain skills from a training manual rather than a childhood tend to get wrong.

At a wide flat section where an old stone wall ran along the path — a boundary marker, older than anyone alive could remember — I held up my fist and we stopped. I put my ear to the air. Nothing from above. I signalled to continue.

"Your English really is excellent," Cooper said quietly as we walked. "Where did you learn?"

"My father traded with Scottish merchants. And books — I had a teacher who believed in them." I scanned the slope ahead. "I'd read my way across most of Britain without leaving Narvik."

"Which parts?"

"Dickens, mostly. Hardy. Some Stevenson. London in fog, Edinburgh on a hill — I'd been to both of them in my mind."

He was quiet for a moment, navigating a section where the path narrowed to a shelf barely wide enough for a boot. "I'm from Wakefield. Not much fog but plenty of hills." He steadied

himself with one hand on the rock face. “When this is over you should come. I’d show you round. Nothing special, but the pubs are decent and my mum makes a good pie.”

The casual certainty that there would be an afterwards — that we would both be in it — struck me as equal parts naïve and necessary. He was young enough that this certainty probably felt like realism to him rather than something that needed to be maintained against evidence.

“I’ll hold you to that,” I said, because it was the right answer and because some part of me wanted it to be true.

We climbed for another twenty minutes, the path working along the contour of the ridge, mostly screened from below by the rock face to our right. I had been on this path in autumn hunting with my father, and in winter when Kristian and I took a wrong turning in a snowstorm and ended up considerably further from home than intended. It looked different now — not because it had changed but because I had, and the same country read differently depending on what you were carrying into it.

At the high point I knew from memory as the best overlook — a natural shelf where the rock dropped away on the valley side and you had a clean line of sight for two kilometres in both directions — I went flat and signalled the others down.

I raised my fist and the column stopped. Below, through a natural notch in the rock, the valley road was visible — and on it, movement.

“Down,” I said quietly, and we were already moving, crawling to the edge of a rocky outcrop.

• • •

The convoy was longer than I had expected. Trucks and light armoured vehicles wound along the valley road in a column that took three minutes to pass our position from head to tail. Blackwood had his binoculars up before he had finished settling behind the rock, scanning methodically from front to rear, his expression carefully empty in the way of an officer processing information before deciding what it meant.

"Supply trucks in the main body," he murmured. "Standard configuration. But look at the rear section."

Mills took the binoculars. His expression did not change, but something behind his eyes went still in the way of a man who has just revised his expectations downward. "Troop transports. Loaded. At least thirty men per vehicle."

I counted the transports. Four of them, with another two that I thought might be carrying heavy equipment rather than men. Whatever was in those last vehicles, it sat low enough to suggest it was not light.

"Reinforcements," Blackwood said. "They're building toward something. Not just holding the valley — preparing an advance."

The column passed below us and the road emptied again, returning to its usual silence, though the silence now had a different quality. I kept my eyes on the tree line to the northeast, where the road curved out of sight, and tried to calculate what forty-plus fresh troops meant for the defensive positions I knew.

Cooper was beside me, watching the empty road. He had his rifle ready in a way that suggested he was thinking about what would happen if a vehicle stopped and someone got out and looked up.

Nothing stopped. The column completed its transit and the engine sounds faded east.

"How long since you've seen a supply convoy that size through this route?" Blackwood asked me.

"Never. We've had small vehicles, motorcycles. Nothing like this."

He nodded slowly, still looking at the road. "They're not resupplying what they have. They're staging for something larger." He lowered the binoculars. "How far to the head of that valley from the German forward position?"

"Twenty kilometres, perhaps twenty-five by road. Less if they come through the gap north of the ridge."

"Could they?"

"If they know about it. It's not on most maps." I paused. "But they have Norwegian maps. Pre-war survey maps. The gap is on those."

Blackwood looked at me. "Are they likely to know what the gap is worth?"

"If they have a decent intelligence officer, yes. If they've talked to any local who wanted to cooperate with them, also yes." I kept my voice flat. "We should assume they know."

He was quiet for a moment. The wind moved across the ridge and Cooper shifted his weight behind me.

"Your people have been fighting against impossible odds for a month," Blackwood said. His tone had changed — still controlled, but with a different quality under it. The question of a man genuinely trying to understand something. "Why haven't you given up?"

I thought of my father at the end of the street, his hand raised. My mother holding my face in hers. The kitchen that had smelled of bread on the morning the world ended.

"This is our home," I said. "Where else would we go?"

Something settled in his expression. Not surprise — more the look of a man whose understanding of something has caught up with something he already believed. He nodded once, then turned back to the valley.

"We need to report this immediately. The timeline has moved."

• • •

Going down was faster than coming up, the urgency in Blackwood's movements transmitting itself through the pace he set without a word being said about it. Mills navigated the descent the way experienced soldiers navigate most things — efficiently, without wasted motion. Cooper stayed close to my heels in a way that suggested he was focusing on the path and letting the implications of what we had seen settle later, which was probably the correct approach.

Near the bottom, where the path widened enough to walk two abreast, Blackwood fell into step beside me.

"The gap you mentioned," he said. "The one not on most maps. Can you show me on mine?"

I looked at his map, found our position, traced the route. "Here. The path is very faint now — it was a droving route, decades out of use. But the ground is passable."

"And if the Germans come through it?"

"They'd bypass our current defensive positions. Come in behind the ridge, not against it." I folded his map back along its existing creases. "We'd be outflanked before we knew they were moving."

He took the map back without looking at it. He was looking at me.

"If you were commanding our combined forces," he said carefully, "what would you do?"

It was not a question I had expected, and the carefulness of it told me that he was asking it seriously, not as a courtesy.

"I'd put someone on the gap," I said. "A small team, observation only. Radio contact. The moment the Germans start moving through it, everyone else needs to know." I paused. "And I'd start thinking about fallback positions, because if they're bringing that many men, the current line isn't going to hold regardless."

Blackwood looked at the map again. "The fallback positions — Haugen has them planned?"

"He has plans. Whether there's been time to prepare them properly, I don't know."

"Find out," Blackwood said. "Discreetly." He glanced at me sideways. "I'll be having a conversation with Haugen this afternoon. It would be useful to know how that conversation is likely to go before I have it."

I understood what he was asking. "I'll talk to him."

"Good man."

We came back into camp to the smell of cookfires and the sounds of men on stand-to, and I went to find Haugen before Blackwood could reach him first.

He was at his command position reviewing radio traffic with the focused attention of a man who already suspected he was not going to like what it contained.

"The convoy," I said, and told him what we had seen.

He listened without interrupting, which was how Haugen processed things — completely first, questions later. When I finished he was quiet for a moment.

"Troop transports," he said.

"Four that I counted. Heavy equipment behind those."

"And Blackwood saw all of this."

"He did." I paused. "He wants to discuss fallback positions this afternoon. Before he speaks to you, I think you should know he's already decided they're necessary. He's not coming to ask whether — he's coming to discuss how."

Haugen looked at me steadily. "And you're telling me this because."

"Because you asked me to."

A brief pause. Then the closest thing to approval Haugen typically expressed: a single nod.

"The eastern fallback," he said. "I have positions prepared. He doesn't need to know they've been prepared. Let him think it's a joint decision."

"Yes, sir."

He looked at me for another moment. "You understand what I'm doing."

"You're giving him ownership of a decision that's already made, so he feels he's leading rather than following."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because we need him cooperative for longer than this week."

Another nod. "Go. Tell me what he says."

The afternoon conversation between Haugen and Blackwood, which I translated, was one of the more instructive things I witnessed in those early weeks. Both men were intelligent and professional, and both were engaged in the specific diplomatic maneuvering that happens between allies who need each other and are not entirely sure they trust each other. I translated accurately, as I had promised Haugen I would, and in doing so could observe both sides of something that neither man could see whole.

Blackwood proposed the fallback positions as his idea. Haugen agreed with them with the air of a man being persuaded. Both left the tent satisfied, and the positions that

had existed in Haugen's planning for a week were formally adopted by their combined forces.

Dahl, who had not been present and to whom I described this afterwards, received the account with the expression he had when reality confirmed something he had already filed under obvious.

"Good," he said. "As long as the positions get used, who thought of them doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?"

"No." He poured the last of the evening's coffee, which was cold and had been cold for an hour. "That's a peacetime concern."

• • •

The following days found us in the rhythm of a military alliance — not quite comfortable but functional, two systems learning to coordinate without either fully yielding to the other. British soldiers and Norwegian soldiers shared ground and occasionally shared food and cigarettes, and the harmonica player whose name turned out to be Private Davies played on most evenings, and Kristian complained about it less than he had at the start, which I took as a form of progress.

I moved between the two groups as my role required, translating not just language but register and intent — the things Blackwood meant but didn't say, the things Haugen said more directly than Blackwood expected, the friction points that came from two different military cultures trying to operate in the same mountains. When it worked, it worked well. When it

didn't, I was generally the person who heard about it from both sides separately.

Cooper sought me out on the third evening. He had been given a task that required him to liaise with a Norwegian supply unit that had established a depot two kilometres east, and the liaise part was proving optimistic given that his Norwegian extended to approximately six words, none of them useful.

"I need someone who speaks Norwegian," he said, with the specific desperation of a man who has tried several approaches and arrived at the direct one.

"I speak Norwegian," I said.

"Right. Yes. Obviously." He rubbed the back of his neck in a gesture I found unexpectedly familiar. "The thing is, I'm supposed to have already sorted this two days ago. My sergeant thinks I have sorted it. And I haven't."

I looked at him. He had the particular expression of a young man trying to calculate how much trouble he was in.

"Come on," I said.

The supply depot was run by a Corporal Eide, a heavyset man from Bodø who had the deeply unhelpful quality of refusing to speak anything but his own regional dialect when he was irritated, which he currently was, because a British soldier had been appearing at his depot for two days and gesturing at things without any discernible system.

It took twenty minutes and a certain amount of patient interpretation on my part. Cooper was a quick study — he watched how I moved through the conversation, adjusted his own manner accordingly, and by the end had established what

I suspected would be a workable arrangement with Eide. He had the instinct for knowing when to let someone else do the talking, which was rarer than it should have been and more valuable than he probably knew.

On the walk back, he was quiet for a while.

"I should have come to you two days ago," he said finally.

"Yes."

"I didn't want to seem like I couldn't handle it."

"You couldn't handle it. Not speaking the language."

He absorbed this. "Fair point." He looked at the mountains above the tree line, the last light on the peaks. "Do you think we'll hold? Here, I mean. In Norway."

The question deserved a straight answer. "I don't know. We're doing better than anyone expected. But better than expected isn't necessarily good enough."

He nodded, as though this were the answer he had been prepared for. "At home they told us it was going well. Before we shipped out."

"At home they told you what they knew, probably. Or what they wanted to be true." I pulled my collar up against the wind coming off the slope. "Those aren't always the same thing."

He was quiet for a moment. "My mother writes every week. I write back when I can." A pause. "She sent chocolate."

"The bar you brought over."

"Yes. I thought —" He shrugged. "I don't know what I thought. It seemed like the thing to do."

I thought of what Kristian had said about small gestures meaning more than they looked like, though he had said it in the opposite spirit.

"It was the thing to do," I said.

We came back into camp. Blackwood was standing outside the command tent talking to Mills, and he looked up briefly as we passed and gave the small nod of a man filing information for later use.

• • •

The following week brought the kind of fighting that settled into memory not as distinct events but as a continuous texture — the rhythm of positions held and lost and retaken, the arithmetic of ammunition and men, the particular exhaustion of waiting that came between engagements. We fought alongside the British in four separate actions along the ridge. In two of them, Blackwood's artillery support was the deciding factor. In one of them, my knowledge of a secondary path down the eastern slope was.

In the fourth, we lost three men. Two Norwegian, one British — Davies, whose harmonica had marked the evenings since the alliance began. Kristian took the news without visible reaction, which told me more about how he was doing than visible reaction would have. He had learned, the way all of us were learning, to file grief in a place that could be accessed later and keep moving in the present.

That evening I found Cooper sitting outside his tent in the dark, not doing anything, just sitting.

"Davies," I said.

"Yes." A pause. "He was from my village. We joined up together." He looked at his hands. "His mum and my mum are friends."

I sat down beside him. The camp was settling into its night routine around us.

"I'm sorry," I said, because it was true and because there was nothing more useful to add.

"He used to drive everyone mad with that bloody harmonica," Cooper said. "Everyone complained about it." He was quiet for a moment. "Nobody's going to complain about the silence tonight."

We sat there for a while, the two of us, while the camp went quiet around us and the mountains above held their shapes against the dark sky the way they always had, as though none of this made any particular difference to them.

It was, in its way, the most honest conversation I had with anyone that week.

CHAPTER 3

The Tide Turns

• • •

The operation had been a success by military standards. We had repelled three German advances in the past week, inflicting heavier casualties than we had sustained. By any objective measure, we were holding.

And yet.

The feeling was difficult to name precisely, but it had been building for days — a quality in the air of the camp, in the way men moved and spoke, that had nothing to do with the tactical situation and everything to do with something underneath it. Supplies were running low, not critically but noticeably. The resupply shipments that had been promised were not arriving

on the promised schedule. Officers spoke in shorter sentences. The British soldiers, who had been gradually integrating with our unit over the preceding weeks — sharing fires, sharing cigarettes, developing the kind of wordless understanding that comes from sleeping in the same cold and standing the same watches — had begun to keep more to themselves.

I noticed it first in the small things. A British sergeant who had taken to eating with our section stopped appearing at our fire. Equipment that had been casually stacked began reappearing in organised piles near the British vehicles. Nothing definitive. Nothing you could point to and call evidence. Just a shift in the texture of the camp that I could not stop returning to in the spaces between duties.

We had been holding this ridge for three weeks. Three weeks of successful resistance, of proving that Norwegian soldiers on Norwegian ground could make the Germans pay for every metre. Every morning when I watched the fjord below and thought of my father's boat still at its moorings in Narvik — or wherever it was now, I had not had word since the mobilisation — I reminded myself of this. *We are holding. We are holding.* It had started as conviction and was becoming, gradually, something more like prayer.

I was cleaning my rifle when Captain Blackwood approached. His uniform was more dishevelled than usual, dark circles prominent beneath his eyes. He had the look of a man who had been managing something difficult for longer than was comfortable.

"A word, Solberg?" Not really a question.

• • •

He led me to the shelf of rock overlooking the fjord — the same overlook where Dahl kept his observation habit, though Dahl was not there now. The fjord below was grey this morning, the mountains on the far side faint behind low cloud. A good place for a private conversation, and Blackwood had chosen it deliberately, which told me before he said a word that the conversation required privacy.

He offered me a cigarette. I had not had one in four days. I took it.

He lit his and stood looking at the fjord. For a while he said nothing. I had learned, in the weeks of working alongside him, that he arrived at directness eventually and that pressing him toward it produced only more care, not more speed. He was the kind of man who prepared his sentences before he spoke them. The preparation was usually worth waiting for.

"Our countries have been allies for a month now," he said. "Tell me — what have you heard from your command about the larger campaign? The overall picture."

I studied the side of his face. He was not a man who asked questions he did not know the answers to; the question was an opening, not a request for information. "Very little, sir. Communications have been sporadic since the Germans took the major radio stations."

He nodded, exhaling smoke that the wind pulled immediately north. "And what do the men think? Your Norwegian soldiers. What's the talk around your fires at night?"

"They believe we'll hold. That with British support, we'll push the Germans back."

Something moved across his features — controlled almost immediately, but not quite in time. The expression of a man who has just received confirmation of something he had hoped was not true.

"I see," he said.

The cold that found me in that moment had nothing to do with the temperature.

"Is there something I should know, Captain?"

He was quiet. He had the particular stillness of a man managing a significant weight, holding it level through concentration rather than ease. "The Germans moved on France and the Low Countries a week ago. You may have heard fragments."

"Rumours."

"They're not rumours. They're advancing quickly. More quickly than anticipated." He turned his cigarette in his fingers. "Britain's resources are finite. The calculations about where those resources are most needed are changing."

"Changing to mean Norway less."

He did not deny it. "I'm speaking carefully because I am not authorised to speak at all. I'm telling you what I can because you've earned something better than silence, and because silence, in this case, would be its own kind of dishonesty."

I looked at the grey fjord below. It lay still, as it always lay still, indifferent to everything on its banks. “What will happen to our men? If the calculations go a certain way.”

He held his gaze on the water. “Some arrangement would be made. I would work to ensure it was as fair as possible.” A pause. “Men with particular skills, with language — there would be options for those men. For you specifically, there would be options.”

I understood what he was building for me, under the words. An exit. Constructed with care and genuine concern, from real regard for me as a person. It was still an exit.

“What about the men without options?” I said.

He turned to look at me properly. For a moment, beneath the officer’s composure, I saw the man it cost him to be — not a man without conscience, not a man comfortable with what he was telling me, but a man carrying a weight he had not chosen and could not set down. A man who had accepted that the world contains situations in which all available choices are inadequate and the task is to find the least inadequate one. It was not the face of a coward. It was not a face I wanted to see on him.

“The arrangement will be as fair as possible,” he said again. The only answer available to him.

Before I could respond, Haugen’s footsteps on the path behind us ended the conversation.

“Corporal Solberg. Report to the command tent. We’ve received new communications from headquarters.”

Blackwood and I exchanged a glance. The British officer did not seem surprised.

"Sir," I acknowledged, and ground out my cigarette against the rock before following Haugen, leaving Blackwood on the overlook with the grey fjord spread before him and whatever he was carrying.

• • •

The command tent held people I had not seen before — Norwegian naval officers who had apparently arrived during the night. They had the manner of men who had come a long way to deliver news they did not want to deliver. Maps covered the table, marked with notations that were outside my infantry vocabulary but whose overall direction I could read: consolidation, contraction, the geometry of men deciding what they can and cannot hold.

"Corporal Solberg," Haugen said. "You're being reassigned to assist with coordination between our forces and the British. Your English skills are needed."

"What operation, sir?"

The naval officers exchanged glances. A Commander stepped forward. "We're consolidating our defensive positions. The British Royal Navy is sending additional vessels to support our coastal defence efforts."

It sounded plausible. It was the kind of thing that was said when something else was meant. I had been in enough military conversations by now to hear the difference between language

that contained its meaning and language that was constructed to conceal it.

"Consolidating where, sir?"

"That's not your concern, Corporal." The Commander's tone closed the question. "You'll be briefed on your specific duties. Gather your section and prepare to move out at oh-four-hundred tomorrow."

Outside the tent, Kristian was waiting.

• • •

He had positioned himself around the corner from the tent entrance, which was not quite hiding but was as close to it as a man his size could manage. His rifle was slung across his back and he was rubbing the back of his neck with the focused energy of a man who had been thinking hard about something and had not arrived at anything satisfying.

"Did they tell you?" he said, without any preliminary.

"Tell me what?"

He looked around the camp with the quick, practiced assessment of a man checking who was close enough to hear. Then he took me by the arm and walked me around the supply shed to the back of it, out of sight of the main path.

• • •

He had been on the early radio watch — four until six in the morning, the shift nobody wanted, when the cold was deepest and the mind most resistant to sharpness.

He told it to me in pieces, the way it had arrived — the way things arrive on an early watch when you have been sitting in a wooden box with a headset on for two hours and most of what you have received is routine and your attention has gone to the slightly glazed place it goes when nothing requires it.

The British used a rotating set of frequencies for different types of traffic. He had learned the pattern over the past weeks, partly from listening and partly from correlating what he received with what he observed happening in camp. The administrative frequency was the least encrypted of them — routine logistics, personnel accounting, the internal paperwork of a functioning military unit, none of which was particularly sensitive.

At five twenty in the morning, on the administrative frequency, a transmission had come in that was not routine.

He had caught it mid-sequence, already transmitting, and had reached for his pencil with the reflex of a man whose hands know to move before his mind has identified why. The words came in clear English, partly coded but using a cipher thin enough that he had broken it with the basic German intelligence vocabulary they had taught him in training and the pattern he had already established in his mind from the preceding weeks.

Extraction timeline. Priority classification: OMEGA. All elements, central sector, to comply. Embarkation sequence follows.

He had written it down as it came, his pencil moving in the cold. The transmission had lasted four minutes. By the end of it he had enough.

"They're withdrawing," he said to me, behind the supply shed, his voice carrying the flat certainty of a man reporting rather than interpreting. "All forces from central Norway, within the week. Not repositioning. Withdrawing. The word in the transmission was evacuation."

The cold that had found me on the overlook settled deeper now.

"You're certain of what you received?"

He reached into his breast pocket and handed me a folded piece of paper — the pencilled notes from the watch, the words fragmentary but coherent, the code annotations in the margin in his handwriting. I read them and handed them back.

"They had already decided when Blackwood was having his conversations about coordination and deployment." His voice had found a new register — lower and harder than what I was used to from Kristian, the voice of a man who has had something confirmed that he had hoped would not be confirmed. "When Haugen was agreeing to joint fallback positions. When Davies was playing his harmonica." He folded the paper and put it back. "All of it was theatre. They knew they were leaving."

I thought of Blackwood on the overlook that morning. *Nothing has been decided yet*. A technically accurate statement about decisions made above his level, while the logistics of departure moved below him. A decent man threading the

needle between his orders and his conscience, and landing in the place where both could claim they had been honoured.

"Where are they going?" I asked.

"South first. Then Britain. The transmission used a phrase —" he looked at his notes without taking them out again, having memorised them — "strategic reassessment of allied commitments in the northern theatre." The bitterness in his voice when he said it was not the bitter disappointment of a man who had trusted something that failed him. It was something cooler and more finished. He had stopped trusting this weeks ago. This was merely the proof arriving.

"Pretty words," he said. "For running away."

I stood with it for a moment. The supply shed behind me smelled of canvas and cold oil. In the main camp, twenty metres away, the ordinary sounds of morning continued — men at their duties, the smell of cook fires, the distant sound of the watch changing. None of it had changed. The camp looked identical to what it had looked like yesterday morning. The information Kristian carried had no visible form.

"Before we do anything," I said, "I need to think."

He looked at me steadily. "There's not much to think about. They're leaving. We're staying. That's the whole of it."

I was not certain he was wrong. But I was not yet willing to say so.

• • •

That night, sleep would not come.

I lay in my sleeping position for an hour listening to the camp. Not to the sounds that were always there — the distant watch, the wind on the ridge, the occasional movement of men whose sleep was light — but to the quality beneath them. The camp had a sound when it was static, a particular background noise made of a hundred small regularities. I had been listening to it for three weeks and knew it the way you know a piece of music well enough to notice when a note goes wrong.

The note was wrong.

At midnight I gave up and got up.

The British section of camp was across the main track, occupying the southern end of our shared position. I had moved freely through it for weeks — my role made it routine, the alliance had made it easy — and my walking through it now, even at midnight, would not look unusual to anyone watching.

What I saw, item by item, did not look unusual either.

A soldier sorting equipment by lantern light. Another shifting a wooden crate to a vehicle that had not been used in over a week. A third carrying what appeared to be personal kit toward the supply vehicles rather than to a storage point. These were all things that happened in a camp at night, in isolation, without significance.

It was the sum.

I walked slowly, with the unhurried movement of a man who could not sleep and had decided to walk rather than lie awake. Nobody stopped me. Nobody looked at me with anything beyond the brief assessment that soldiers give to

anything that moves through their environment — identified, not a threat, continue.

Harrison — the lance corporal who had given me cigarettes, the quiet man from the Midlands — was wrapping something in oilcloth near his tent. A small object, irregularly shaped. He set it in a crate, examined how it sat, adjusted it slightly, examined it again. The care he was taking told me it was personal rather than military issue. Men pack personal things carefully when they know there might not be a second chance to do it properly.

I kept walking.

Near the perimeter, two privates were conducting an inventory of something stacked under a tarpaulin. They were counting quietly, one with a list, one calling the numbers, the efficiency of men running through a checklist that had a deadline. Not the casual inventory of a static position. The counted inventory of men preparing for movement.

Further along, at the edge of the communications tent, an officer I recognised by his insignia as one of Blackwood's subordinates was feeding documents into a small metal burning box. The box was nearly full. He fed them steadily, unhurried, watching each one catch and blacken. When one refused to light properly he used a small stick to push it fully into the flame.

I had seen this once before. In the first days of the invasion, a Norwegian administrative unit had passed through our position, heading north, burning their records as they went. The same motion. The same careful, methodical destruction.

The same expression of a man performing a task that is necessary and unfortunate.

I stood in the shadow of the tree line and watched until the officer finished and carried the box away.

The camp that had been ours for three weeks — shared, argued over, gradually becoming a single thing rather than two things side by side — was being divided. The division was happening quietly and without announcement, in the middle of the night, in the way of things that are better managed before anyone has to speak about them directly.

I walked back to my own section of the camp slowly, observing.

Each thing I saw placed itself, one by one, alongside the thing before it, and the shape they formed was not ambiguous.

Not in three days. Not in a week. The preparations already underway suggested the timeline was shorter than whatever Blackwood had implied on the overlook. The operation was in motion.

Near the edge of our section of the camp, I found Sergeant Dahl keeping watch, his silhouette unmistakable against the lighter darkness of the sky. He had chosen a position where he could see both the German approach and the British section of camp, which I suspected was not coincidental.

"Can't sleep," I said.

"Nor can I," he said, which from Dahl was a statement of fact rather than a complaint. He shifted on the fallen log that served as his seat. "Sit."

I sat.

For a while neither of us spoke. The distant watch fires of the German positions were visible as faint warm points on the dark mass of the opposite ridge. Between us and them lay the valley, the road we had watched the convoy travel, the network of paths and approaches we had spent three weeks learning to control. Ground we understood. Ground we had bled for.

"How long have you known?" I asked.

"Since the convoy." He was looking at the German ridge, not at me. "The numbers don't work for a defence. They work for a larger German operation than we can counter with what we have here. I started watching the British section more carefully after that."

"What did you see?"

"The same things you saw tonight, I expect." He poured something from a flask — not coffee, something else, something I didn't ask about — and held it out. I shook my head. He drank. "Been in the army twenty years. Learn to recognise patterns. The way officers walk, the kinds of orders that come down. The way men treat their personal equipment." He paused. "Seen evacuation preparations three times in my career."

"And now?"

"Fourth time." His voice was as level as it always was, but the levelness had a different quality tonight — not the controlled calm of a man who was not affected, but the steady voice of a man who was affected and had decided to carry it

anyway. “They’ll announce it at the last possible moment. Keeps the situation manageable until it isn’t.”

“They can’t just leave us,” I said, and heard immediately how naïve it sounded, like something I would have said six weeks ago. “Norway is their ally.”

Dahl finally looked at me. “Countries don’t have allies, Solberg. They have interests. Right now, Britain’s interest is in keeping their forces intact to fight elsewhere.” He was quiet for a moment. “They’re not wrong about their interests. France is falling. They need everything they have. It’s a rational decision.”

“And Norway?”

“Norway is not the rational decision.” Something shifted in his face — brief, controlled, gone quickly. “That’s why we’ll stay. Even when they go.”

The sureness of it struck me. Not defiance. Not performance. Just the simple factual statement of a man who had already worked through the calculation and arrived at his answer.

“You’re certain.”

“About staying? Yes.” He looked back at the German ridge. “About the outcome? No. But certainty about the outcome is not what determines the choice.”

I sat with that for a long while.

• • •

At dawn I reported to the British communications unit as ordered, assigned to a Lieutenant Parker who gave me tasks that had nothing to do with my actual skills — filing, carrying, the kind of auxiliary work that exists to keep a person occupied rather than informed. I recognised the assignment for what it was: a way of keeping me nearby and visible and out of anything consequential while the larger machinery moved.

By midday I had positioned myself, with the ordinary freedom of movement my role afforded, near enough to the British command tent to hear fragments of conversation through the canvas. The words that reached me were the ones I had already assembled in my mind: extraction, embarkation sequence, priority personnel, timeline.

I was still deciding how to confront Blackwood directly when I saw the ships.

They came up the fjord in the late afternoon, visible from the ridge as dark shapes resolving slowly into recognisable forms. Not the warships that had been discussed — not the cruisers and destroyers that were going to reinforce our coastal position. Transport vessels. The kind built for moving large numbers of men over water, not for engaging the enemy. Three of them, moving with purpose.

My hands clenched at my sides.

Below me on the path, Blackwood appeared. He stopped beside me and followed my gaze down to the fjord, and for a moment we simply looked at the ships together. He had the expression of a man who had arrived at the end of something he had been managing for a long time and was experiencing the

particular exhaustion of a managed problem that could no longer be managed.

"You deserved to hear this officially," he said quietly. "Not like this."

"When?" One word, because that was all I had room for at that moment.

"Three days. The evacuation order came directly from London. It's not a field decision." He said this not as an excuse but as context, the difference mattering to him even if I was not certain it mattered to me. "I've been trying to find a way to tell you that was less — " He stopped. "There wasn't one."

"And the Norwegians? What are we told? What are we offered?"

He was quiet long enough that the silence was its own answer. Then: "Approximately thirty per cent can be accommodated on the transport vessels. Priority will go to men with specialised skills. The remainder —" He paused again.

"Will be left."

He did not deny it.

Something happened inside me in that moment that I did not fully understand until later. It was not rage — I had expected rage and was surprised by the absence of it. It was something quieter and more permanent. A last door closing. Not a dramatic closure, not a slamming, but the quiet sound of a latch engaging. The part of me that had been waiting for the situation to be something other than what it was finally stopped waiting.

"I need to tell my men," I said.

"Officially, I cannot allow that." He made no move to stop me. "Solberg." I had started to turn away; his voice caught me. "If I could change this, I would."

I looked back at him. He meant it. I was certain of that. He was a decent man inside an indecent situation, and his decency had not prevented the situation from being what it was, and we both knew that.

"Would you stay?" I asked. "If the choice were yours alone?"

Something moved through his expression — a fracture in the officer's composure, brief and real. He was, for a moment, not the controlled professional who had arrived on our ridge with his maps and his clipped certainty. He was a man who had made a promise, in the general way that soldiers make promises to the men beside them, and had discovered that the promise could not be kept.

"I have my orders," he said finally. A true answer and an incomplete one simultaneously.

"So do I," I replied, and walked away to find Haugen.

• • •

The Norwegian officers had been informed that morning. I found Haugen at the command position, not reviewing maps or radio traffic as he usually was, but simply sitting. Looking at the ridge. He had the particular stillness of a man who has received his information and is now working out what to do with it, and has not yet found an answer he can use.

He looked up when I arrived. We both knew what I knew and neither of us pretended otherwise.

"The men," he said. "This evening."

"Yes, sir."

He nodded once. "Be there."

• • •

The mess tent that evening held a different atmosphere than anything we had experienced since the invasion. The fighting had produced fear, grief, exhaustion, anger — but always alongside purpose, always within the containing frame of *we are here and we are fighting and that is what we are doing*. What the men brought into the tent that evening was something else. Uncertainty of a kind that fighting does not produce because fighting, at least, gives you something to do with your hands.

Haugen stood at the front of the assembled company and did not make them wait longer than necessary.

"The British forces will withdraw within seventy-two hours," he said. His voice was steady in the way that required effort to maintain, which was not the same as a voice that was naturally steady, but it held. "They have offered transport for approximately thirty per cent of our remaining forces. Those with specialised skills — radio operators, medics, engineers — will receive priority. The remainder will be selected by lottery."

The silence that followed was different from the silence after bad news in a firefight. In a firefight, silence means

assessing. This silence meant absorbing something that could not be made smaller than it was.

The murmurs that followed were not loud. Men speaking in the voice you use when you have something to say and are not sure there is a useful place to say it. Mikkelsen, who was three years younger than me and had been corresponding with a girl in Bodø since before the invasion, was looking at the tent floor with his jaw set. Lunde, who had a wife and two small children in Ålesund and had stopped talking about them sometime in the second week on the ridge, was rubbing the inside of his wrist in the repetitive way he had when he was trying not to feel something. Berg, who had never been talkative even before any of this and was less so now, simply nodded once, as though this confirmed something he had already concluded.

Fairness is an inadequate anesthetic for cruelty. Haugen's lottery was as fair a mechanism as could be devised for an unjust situation, and it mattered not at all to the men looking at the fact of it. Thirty per cent. Someone had sat in a room somewhere and decided that this was the appropriate number of Norwegians to rescue from the consequences of a decision taken at levels above them, and the arithmetic of it was going to divide this tent into those who continued and those who did not, and there was no version of that which was other than what it was.

Haugen fielded questions for fifteen minutes. Some were practical — when would the lottery be drawn, where would the transport be, what should men who were not selected do. Some were not quite questions but the form questions take when a man needs to say something and the only available shape is interrogative. Haugen answered the practical ones precisely

and the others honestly, which is to say he said he did not know, and he said it in a way that acknowledged the weight of not knowing.

When the tent dissolved into smaller conversations, I found Kristian at the edge of it, standing apart, watching the other men with the expression he had when he was thinking about something he did not want to think about.

"Did you enter the lottery?" I asked.

"No." Immediate. Definitive. Like a door that had been locked before the question was asked. "I won't leave Norway. My family is in Trondheim. My sisters." He looked at me. "What about you? With your English they'd take you without the lottery."

"I haven't decided."

His expression changed. Not the way a face changes when it receives unexpected news, but the way it changes when it receives confirmation of something it had already feared. "The Erik I grew up with wouldn't hesitate. The Erik who stood in the street in Narvik on the ninth of April and said *yes* before I'd finished asking the question — he wouldn't be hesitating."

"That's not entirely fair."

"No," he agreed. "It's not." He was quiet for a moment. "But it's what I think."

His words found the exact place they were aimed at, which was the part of me that had been arguing with itself since the overlook, since the ships, since the sound of Dahl's voice saying *that's why we'll stay*. The argument in my head sounded, when

I listened to it honestly, less like reasoning and more like a man trying to find a version of leaving that he could live with.

Continuing the fight from Britain might accomplish more than being captured here. This was true. It might. But it was also the kind of true thing that can be used to justify things that are not, at their core, about truth.

"I need time," I said.

He nodded. He did not push further. Whatever he had said was already said, and he was not a man who needed to repeat himself.

• • •

That night I climbed to the ridge above the camp alone.

It was past midnight, cold in the way that April in Norway is cold even when it is technically spring — not the deep paralysing cold of January but a persistent, specific cold that found the gaps in whatever you were wearing and reminded you it was still there. My breath came in visible clouds. The path up was familiar enough that I could walk it without a torch.

The Northern Lights came out sometime after I reached the high point. First as a faint luminescence on the northern horizon, barely distinguishable from the residual glow of the sky, and then more fully, the colours finding themselves: green first, spreading slowly, then a thread of blue that thickened into something more definite, then the faint pink that appeared only on the best nights and that I had not seen since before the invasion. They moved with the slow deliberate motion of something that had been doing this since before there were

people to watch it and would continue long after the last of us was gone.

My mother used to say the lights were the spirits of women who had died unmarried, dancing. My father, who had grown up with the same folklore and rejected it in adulthood as he rejected most things that could not be measured, said they were an electromagnetic phenomenon, which he had read about in a scientific journal and found satisfying as an explanation. Both of them, on a clear night, would come outside to watch regardless of what they believed they were watching.

I had seen these lights from this latitude for my entire life. From the harbour and from fishing boats and from the school field and from the ridge itself in hunting season, and from positions higher on the mountain than this one over the months of fighting that were behind me now. I had never watched them from so far into my own future as I did tonight. Standing on the ridge with everything that had happened in the last six weeks behind me and everything I could not yet see in front of me, I felt myself at some kind of edge — not a dramatic edge, not a precipice, but the kind of threshold that is only visible as a threshold afterwards, when you can see that you crossed it.

Below, the fjord held the lights in its still water. The reflection was not a perfect copy of the sky — it was darker, steadier, the movement reduced to a slow shimmer — but it was recognisably the same thing translated into a different medium. The British transport ships sat in that reflection, dark shapes against the colour, three of them, waiting.

In three days they would take thirty per cent of the remaining Norwegian forces.

I stood with that number for a while. Thirty per cent. Haugen had said it in the flat voice he used for operational facts, the same voice he used for ammunition counts and position distances, and I had watched what it did to the faces of the men in the tent. The number was designed to be fair. It distributed the cruelty as evenly as arithmetic could manage. It was still thirty per cent.

The choice before me was the kind of choice that feels impossible not because there is no right answer but because the right answer requires you to be a certain kind of person, and you are not yet certain you are that person. Both sides of the argument were real. Neither could be dismissed.

Staying meant probable capture or worse. The German advance was methodical and it was not slowing. Three weeks of successful resistance had been three weeks of men who knew the ground making the Germans pay for it, and that was real and mattered, but it was not the same thing as winning and it was becoming, measurably, less sustainable. Staying meant choosing a losing fight on moral grounds rather than a possibly useful existence elsewhere, and the people who loved me would not thank me for it if I did not come back.

Going meant leaving Norway. Not temporarily — leaving it in the sense of stepping off a ship in a foreign country while the thing I was supposed to be defending fell behind me. It meant leaving my father's boat in the harbour and my mother's kitchen and the fjord I had been measuring myself against since I was old enough to go out on it. It meant leaving Kristian, who

had already decided and would not reconsider and whose decision I understood completely, and going to Britain, and contributing to a war effort that had just demonstrated in very clear terms what Norway weighed in its calculations.

The case for going was rational. The case for staying was something else.

I thought of Dahl, who had said *that's why we'll stay* without drama and without apparent effort, as though the answer had been filed away long before the question arrived. I thought of Haugen, sitting at his command position with the stillness of a man who had received his impossible situation and was working out what to do with it, not because he expected a good solution but because working out what to do with things was what you did. I thought of Kristian's voice: *the Erik who said yes before I'd finished the question.*

Was that an accurate description of me? I had been turning it over since the mess tent. It was not entirely accurate — I had hesitated on the dock, I had said *maybe next week* to my father about the boat, I had been full of the young man's vague ambitions that amounted to an extended act of avoidance. The Erik who had answered Kristian's implicit question on the street in Narvik on the ninth of April had not been the consistent version of himself. He had been, for that one moment, the best version. The version that existed when the situation stripped away the room for equivocation.

The situation was stripping away the room now.

I thought about my father on the dock, turning the *Sigrid's* keys over in his hand. The shrapnel in his left leg. The war he had come back from quieter than he had left it, which I had

never asked him about because he would not have answered, and which I understood now as something you carry rather than something you speak. The particular expression he had for things he was going to say carefully. The way he had watched Kristian and me walk away from the corner of the street.

The lights moved above the fjord.

I made my decision.

Not in the dramatic way of stories, where clarity arrives like a physical thing and everything simplifies. It was not like that. It was more like recognising something I had already known — something that had been present for days, waiting for me to stop arguing around it and look at it directly. When I finally looked at it, it was not complicated. It was the simplest thing I had thought all day.

I was Norwegian. This was Norway. The people I loved were here. The ground I knew was here. I had come up the mountain in April with a rifle and a fisherman's son's ignorance of what war actually was, and I had learned a great deal since then, and none of what I had learned suggested that leaving was the correct application of what I now knew.

That was all. It was not heroism. It was geography, and obligation, and the particular stubbornness that Kristian had been trying to articulate when he described the man who had answered before the question was finished.

I stayed on the ridge for a long time, watching the lights until they faded, which took another hour. The cold settled into my bones with the patience of something that had all the time in the world.

When I came down, the camp was still and the ships were still dark shapes in the reflected water below, and I knew what I was going to do. Whether it led to the best outcome I could not know. Whether it was the answer that a man like the one I was trying to be would give — that much was settled.

There is a difference between those two kinds of rightness. The war had been teaching me this since April.

I went to find Kristian.

CHAPTER 4

Difficult Decisions

• • •

"They're accelerating the timeline."

Blackwood's words cut through the predawn stillness as I helped load communication equipment onto one of the trucks bound for the harbour. His uniform was impeccable again — the creases back, the buttons right — as though he had reclaimed something of himself in preparation for what was coming. The officer who had sat with me on the overlook two days ago, visibly carrying the weight of what he was doing, had been replaced by the version of himself that could do it.

"The evacuation?" I asked, though I already knew.

He nodded. “Intelligence reports suggest the Germans know we’re pulling out. They’re mobilising to cut off the harbour. We move tonight instead of tomorrow.”

I set down the radio equipment. “That leaves no time for the lottery.”

“The decision has been made at higher levels. Essential personnel only.” He paused, not meeting my eyes. “You should come with us, Solberg. Your language skills would be valuable in coordinating future operations.”

There it was. The offer I had both expected and dreaded, arriving with the brisk practicality of a man who had cleared his conscience by framing it as operational rather than personal.

“And my men? Kristian? Dahl?”

“I can’t make promises for anyone else.”

I had already made my decision on the ridge two nights ago. I had gone to find Kristian afterwards, and he had simply nodded, as though he had known, and that had been that. But hearing the offer spoken aloud produced its own specific gravity.

“I appreciate the offer, Captain,” I said. “But my place is here.”

Something settled in his expression — not surprise, but a kind of completion, as though this answer had been the one he had expected and the formality of the question had simply been required. He extended his hand. “It’s been an honour, Corporal Solberg.”

"Likewise, Captain."

His truck pulled away toward the harbour. I watched it go until the tree line took it, and then I went to find Haugen.

• • •

The briefing was short. Norwegian officers only, gathered around Haugen's map in the grey predawn light, their faces carrying the specific look of men adjusting to a situation they have accepted rather than one they have made peace with. The distinction mattered.

Rear guard. Hold the position through the evacuation. Allow the British ships to clear the fjord. Then fall back to the prepared positions in the mountains.

Dahl received these orders without visible reaction, which was how Dahl received everything. He studied the map for a moment after Haugen finished. "Contact timeline," he said.

"German forward units should reach the southern approach by sixteen hundred at the earliest. The harbour should be clear by fourteen hundred. There will be a gap." Haugen paused. "Or there should be."

There were no further questions.

• • •

The hours between the briefing and the first German contact were the longest I had spent in this war that did not involve immediate danger.

This was worse than immediate danger. Immediate danger occupied the hands and the eyes and the reflexes and left nowhere for thought to accumulate. Waiting left too much room. The men filled it the way soldiers always fill it — with the small tasks of maintenance and preparation, the repetitive motions of men who need something to do with their hands while their minds work over things they cannot stop working over.

Kristian cleaned his rifle. I had watched him clean it more times than I could count over the past weeks, and the motion had become something close to meditative for him — bolt out, patches through the barrel, oil on the working parts, the satisfaction of moving mechanisms that moved the way they were supposed to move. He was not a man who found waiting easy, and this was how he made it bearable.

Johansen sat with his back against a tree and worked on a letter. He had been writing the same letter, or variations of it, for three days. I had not asked who it was to. Some things were private in a way that became more private the more precarious the situation.

Mikkelsen, who was the youngest of us at twenty, sharpened his knife on a whetstone he had been carrying since the first day, though the knife had not needed sharpening for at least a week. The sound of it — that specific high patient scraping — was its own kind of reassurance.

"What do you think it's like?" Mikkelsen asked at some point. Not to anyone in particular.

"What what's like?" Kristian said, without looking up.

"Surrendering. Laying your rifle down. What does that feel like."

Nobody answered immediately. It was not the kind of question that wanted an immediate answer.

"My father surrendered in 1918," Dahl said, from where he was sitting on a log with his coffee. "He said it felt like putting down something you'd been carrying so long you'd forgotten it had weight." A pause. "He also said the walk home took most of a year and was the worst part of the war."

"He got home though," Mikkelsen said.

"He got home."

Mikkelsen returned to his knife.

Kristian looked up at me across the fire. He had the expression he sometimes got in the café in Narvik — that particular Kristian look of having thought about something until he reached the part of it that was worth saying, and then deciding to say it. "We should have a drink when this is over," he said. "In Andersen's. Back table."

"We don't have to wait until it's over," I said.

"No, but it'll mean more then." He nodded to himself, as though having arrived at a satisfying conclusion. "We'll sit in the back and Andersen will bring the good stuff out of the back, not the stuff he gives to people he doesn't know, and we'll drink it and not talk about any of this."

"Not talk about any of what?"

"Exactly."

Johansen folded his letter and put it in his breast pocket. He looked across at us. “Can I come?”

“Of course you can come,” Kristian said, and Johansen looked briefly younger than he was, and then returned to looking the way he had been looking all morning.

We waited.

• • •

Private Cooper found me as I was setting up the machine gun nest overlooking the main road.

“Thought you’d be gone by now,” I said, and heard the edge in my own voice.

“Shipping out in an hour.” He shifted his weight, looked at the gun, looked at me. He had the manner of a man who has something to say and is trying to find the version of it that doesn’t sound like an excuse. “Listen, Solberg. This isn’t right. What we’re doing.”

“Following orders is never wrong, isn’t that what they teach you?”

“That’s not—” He stopped. Frustrated, brief. Then he thrust a small package wrapped in oilcloth into my hands. “Extra ammunition for that Krag. And chocolate. My mum sent it.” He paused. “The stuff I brought over to your fire, the first week. Same batch.”

The same chocolate his mother had sent that Kristian had eaten with such deliberate neutrality. I looked up at him — this young British soldier, genuinely troubled by something he had

no power to change. His expression was not the expression of a man doing a performatively decent thing. He was, I thought, exactly what he appeared to be: a person who felt things and did not know what to do with the feeling when the thing causing it was larger than him.

"Thank you," I said. The bitterness went out of me.

"We'll be back," he said, with the earnest certainty that belonged to his age and that the war had not yet finished taking from him. "Britain won't abandon Norway forever. You have my word."

We both understood what a private's word was worth in the calculations of generals and politicians. I shook his hand anyway.

"Stay alive, Cooper."

"You too." The brief honest smile. "I still owe you that tour."

I watched him walk back toward the harbour road. He did not look back, which I thought was a deliberate choice rather than an absence of feeling.

• • •

As evening came on, the last British ships prepared to depart.

From my position on the hillside I watched the boarding. Orderly lines of men carrying what they could, leaving behind what they could not. Blackwood was somewhere in it — I had last seen him at the command tent, the officer version of himself fully restored, directing the final phase of withdrawal

with the precise efficiency I had come to expect from him. He had not looked for me and I had not looked for him, and I thought that was probably right.

The ships moved slowly at first, easing out of the harbour into the main channel of the fjord. The light was going, the sky to the west still holding a faint copper at the horizon, the water darker below it. I could see the shapes of the vessels distinctly at first — the transport ships, the naval escort, the smaller support craft — and then less distinctly, as the distance and the failing light worked on them together.

I thought of all the things I might think about watching them go. The betrayal, which was real and which I had largely worked through already on the ridge two nights ago. The calculation that had been made in London about what Norway was worth relative to France, which was a reasonable calculation by certain measures and which I found I could not argue with abstractly and could not accept personally and was going to have to carry both of those things at once. Blackwood's face on the overlook, the cost briefly showing. Cooper's earnest certainty.

I thought about the men beside me on this hillside. Kristian, cleaning his rifle again, the motion so familiar now it was like watching him breathe. Dahl, standing a short distance away, watching the ships with no expression that I could identify. Johansen, who had finally finished his letter and posted it with the last outgoing mail before the communications unit packed up, and who now sat with his hands loose in his lap in the way of a man who has set something down and has not yet decided what to pick up next.

These men had made the same choice I had, through whatever different reasoning, and were here on this hillside making it real.

The ships grew smaller.

I had lived my whole life on the edge of this fjord. I had been on the water most of my life, in my father's boat and before that in the small dinghy he had taught me to handle, learning the way the water moved and the way the wind came off the mountains and the particular colours the fjord took at different times of year. I knew this water. I had measured myself against it since I was old enough to go out on it.

The British lights on the water grew smaller until they were indistinguishable from the stars beginning to show in the darkening sky above, and then I could not find them at all, and then they were simply gone.

Our allies were gone. We were alone.

From somewhere below, the first German mortar shell landed near the harbour.

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The fighting that night was the sharpest we had faced.

The Germans came with the confidence of men who knew the opposition was reduced and the clock was with them. They were not wrong about either thing. What they had not accounted for was the ground — the same advantage we had held for three weeks, the ridgelines and the approaches that we knew in the dark from weeks of standing watch on them, the

positions Haugen had prepared and that Blackwood had been diplomatically presented with as a joint decision.

Haugen's voice on the radio was steady throughout, giving positions and redirecting fire with the calm efficiency of a man who had been preparing for exactly this.

"Fall back to position two. Repeat, fall back to position two."

I signalled my squad — five men where once we had been twelve — and we began the withdrawal, laying covering fire for each other as we moved up the hillside. A mortar shell exploded twenty metres to my right and sent Kristian sprawling. I reached him before I had consciously decided to move.

"I'm fine," he said immediately, already getting an arm under himself, though blood was darkening his uniform. "Shrapnel. Nothing vital."

I helped him up and we continued. Ahead, Dahl was keeping the Madsen working, laying down suppressing fire in the controlled bursts I had come to recognise as his signature — not wasteful, not cautious, exactly what the situation required and no more.

We reached the stone farmhouse at the secondary position just as Haugen was organising the next phase. His face was briefly lit by a flare overhead — sharp, clear lines, the particular look of a man operating without margin.

"They're pushing harder than expected. There's a civilian evacuation on the north road — families, old people, they're not moving fast enough. We need to buy more time." He looked at

me. “Solberg — take two men and secure the eastern approach. If they flank us there, we’re done.”

Kristian was already at my side.

“Don’t argue,” he said. “I can still shoot.”

The wound had darkened a larger area of his uniform than I liked. “Kristian—”

“I can still shoot, Erik.” Steady. Definite.

Johansen fell in without being asked, the rifle easy across his shoulders, his face set.

We moved to the rocky outcrop overlooking the eastern slope in the dark and settled into position. The trees below us were still, and then they were not.

The first German scouts appeared at the edge of the tree line, moving carefully in the way of men who knew they were advancing against a position and were not certain of the opposition. I could make out the shapes of helmets through my scope.

“Wait for my signal,” I said. “Let them get closer.”

Kristian tensed. Johansen breathed steadily beside me.

At a hundred metres I fired. The front man crumpled. Kristian and Johansen opened up immediately, and for several minutes we held the slope — the elevation, the prepared positions, the knowledge of exactly where the ground dropped and where it levelled all doing the work that numbers could not.

Then the MG34 opened up. Positioned behind a fallen tree, firing in the controlled chattering bursts that meant a trained

crew, far heavier than our aging Madsens. Rounds chipped the rock around us and forced us flat.

"That gun has to go," I said.

Kristian looked at the position — the angle, the cover available, the ground between. I could see him calculating. "I'll go left. Draw their fire. You take right, get an angle."

"Kristian—"

He was already moving, keeping low but not low enough to be invisible, the deliberate visibility of a man offering himself as bait and knowing it. The MG34 swung toward him. He threw himself behind a boulder and I moved — cover to cover, each position a calculation, working rightward until I had a clean line on the German emplacement.

Two men on the gun. A third providing security, watching the flanks. I steadied, exhaled, and put three rounds down in quick succession — the gunner, the loader, and then I was already shifting and the third man was returning fire wildly into the wrong position until Johansen's shot, clean and measured, ended it.

Silence.

I signalled across to Kristian's boulder. He emerged, giving me the grim satisfied look I had known since we were boys — the look that said *that worked* without saying anything so undignified as that.

The sniper's bullet took him in the chest.

He went down without a sound, which was wrong — Kristian had never in his life done anything without some

accompanying noise — and the wrongness of the silence was the first thing that reached me, before the understanding reached me, before any of it reached me. I was running before I had processed what I was running toward.

Then I was beside him, and the blood coming through his jacket was too dark and too fast.

"Medic." The word was useless. The nearest medic was three hundred metres away and there was fire between us. "Johansen — cover us."

I got him behind the boulder and pressed my hands against the wound, tearing strips from my shirt, pressing hard, my hands slick. He looked up at me with the specific expression of a man who has received information and is assessing it honestly.

"Don't be dramatic," he said. Each word cost him something. "It's not that bad."

We both knew exactly how bad it was.

"Stay with me," I said. "Just stay with me."

He gripped my wrist. His hand was still strong — still the grip of the man who had lifted me out of the fjord when I was seven years old — and that strength felt like a lie that his body was telling and could not keep telling for long.

"Listen." He had to work for the word. "You need to continue. When I'm gone. Fight for Norway."

"We'll fight together," I said. "Like we promised."

A ghost of a smile. "Always were stubborn."

His hand slackened. His eyes went to the sky, to whatever the sky was in that moment, and then they were still.

I stayed for a moment that lasted considerably longer than it was. My childhood friend. The boy who had decided we were friends when we were seven and had not asked for my agreement on the matter. The man who had stood beside me in every fight since the first morning of the invasion, who had been there in Andersen's café when the radio interrupted the morning programme, who had rubbed the back of his neck and said *we're going to fight* in the same level voice he might have used to propose anything.

Johansen's hand found my shoulder. "Corporal. They're coming again."

I took a breath. "Get his ammunition. And his grenades."

We held the eastern approach for three more hours. Two men instead of three, rotating positions constantly to suggest numbers we did not have, using the ground the way we had learned to use it. When the withdrawal order came, I carried Kristian over my shoulder. He was not light. I was aware of this the way you are aware of things that do not matter and that you carry anyway.

I would not leave him to be buried by German hands in unmarked ground.

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Haugen met us at the logging camp perimeter in the dark. He took in what I was carrying and his face registered brief

surprise, then the grim compression of a man receiving difficult information he was expecting eventually.

"The civilian evacuation is complete," he said. "Your action on the eastern approach bought them the time they needed."

"Permission to bury him properly, sir."

"Granted. Take what time you need." He paused. "He was a good soldier, Solberg. One of the best I've had."

I dug the grave at dawn in the hard Norwegian soil. The ground was still partially frozen below the surface and the digging was slow and the slowness was its own kind of time, the physical effort taking up the space in me that would otherwise have had nowhere to go. Dahl appeared partway through and dug without speaking until the grave was deep enough, and then stepped back and let me finish.

I marked it with a wooden cross — his name, the date. Nothing else. No rank, no regiment, no war. Just Kristian Olsen, returned to his own earth. I had tried to think of something to say and had not found anything. The things I wanted to say were not the kind of things that became words easily — seventeen years of knowing someone, of being known by them, the way he had mimed the explosion with his hands and rubbed the back of his neck when he was thinking and told me things I did not want to hear with enough directness that I could not pretend not to have heard them. None of it condensed into language.

So I stood over the grave in silence, which was probably what he would have preferred anyway. Kristian had been suspicious of speeches.

The fjord was visible from where I stood. Grey in the morning light, still and quiet in the way it was always quiet, indifferent to everything on its banks. Somewhere below its surface, the *Blücher* was still there — that eight thousand tonnes of German certainty that the Oscarsborg guns had dealt with in a single April morning. Kristian had laughed telling me about it. He had mimed the explosion with both hands and then rubbed them together and said *a thousand Germans taking an April swim* with the brief satisfied grin he reserved for things that had gone right.

He had been right about most things, in the end. The British. The arithmetic of the war. The question of what we owed the country we were standing on.

Dahl put his hand briefly on my shoulder and then took it away. He did not say anything. He turned and walked back toward the camp.

I stayed a moment longer.

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Haugen found me still at the grave.

He came alone, which was unusual — Haugen almost always had someone in his orbit, an officer or a runner or a situation requiring his attention. Coming alone, at this hour, to this particular place, told me before he spoke that what he was carrying was not operational.

"Corporal Solberg." His voice was low. "Norwegian high command has officially surrendered to German forces. We are ordered to lay down our arms."

The words were not a surprise. I had been expecting something like them since the night on the ridge with the Northern Lights, since the ships disappearing into the dark of the fjord. That did not make them land any differently.

"When, sir?"

"The order was issued two hours ago. By noon, any soldier still bearing arms will be considered a combatant outside the terms of surrender. The legal protections of the Geneva Convention will no longer apply." He gave this information in the same level voice he used for position reports and fire directives — the voice he had developed, I thought, precisely because men in his position needed to be able to say difficult things without the weight of their own feeling making those things harder than they already were.

He looked at the grave. His expression shifted — something moved across it briefly, not the controlled professional face but the other one, the face of the man it cost something to be who he was. It was only for a moment. Then the control was back.

"Come," he said.

• • •

The remaining men had gathered at the logging camp perimeter without needing to be called, drawn by some collective awareness that something was being said that needed to be heard. Twelve men, where once there had been thirty. They stood in the morning cold with their rifles and their weeks of accumulated weariness, faces I had been looking at for so

long that I knew each one the way you know a landscape you have moved through in all weathers.

Haugen stood before them. He looked at each face in turn, briefly, with the precision of a man conducting an inventory of something that mattered.

"Norwegian high command has officially surrendered," he said. "We are ordered to lay down our arms. Those who comply will be treated as prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention. Transportation to a collection point will be arranged from the main road. You have until noon."

He paused. The silence was the specific silence of men who have received information of great magnitude and are not yet ready to speak.

"Those who make other choices should be in the eastern forest by dusk." He looked at the trees. Then back at the men. "I can say no more than that."

He did not walk away immediately, the way he had in the original chapter moment I had always imagined. He stood. He let the silence be what it was. The responsibility he felt toward these men — toward the choice each of them was now required to make — was visible in the way he stood there and absorbed the weight of it rather than distributing it and moving on.

Then he nodded once, to no one in particular, and walked to the edge of the clearing and stood with his back partly to the men, looking at the trees. Not dismissing them. Just making space.

Nobody spoke immediately. The words settled like sediment, finding their level in each man according to what he had and what he owed and what he was capable of.

Mikkelsen was the first to move. He sat down on a log — the sit of a man whose legs had made a decision before his mind caught up — and looked at his rifle across his knees, and then looked at nothing in particular.

I watched him. He was twenty years old. He had joined in April with the same insufficient understanding that all of us had had, and he had learned what we all had learned, and he was sitting on this log with a calculation to make that no twenty-year-old should be required to make alone.

He looked up and found me looking at him.

"My mother is in Tromsø," he said. Not an explanation. A fact, offered.

"I know," I said.

"My father is dead. It's just us." He looked back at his rifle. "If I'm taken prisoner, she knows where I am. If I go into the forest…" He did not finish.

I sat down beside him. The cold was in the trees and in the ground and in the specific quality of the morning light.

"It's the right choice," I said. "For you."

He had the expression of a young man who needs permission he knows he should not need. "You think so?"

"I think you know what you owe your mother. That's not a small thing."

"What about Norway?"

"Norway will still need people after this is over. People who survived." I looked toward the grave visible between the trees. "Not everyone can stay. Not everyone should."

He nodded slowly. He picked up his rifle and held it for a long moment — the rifle he had carried since April, cleaned and maintained through everything — and then he leaned it with care against the log and stood up. The care was the thing that stayed with me. As though it deserved a proper resting place. As though the leaving of it was something to be done with respect.

"Tell them I wasn't a coward," he said. "If anyone asks."

"You weren't," I said. "Not even close."

He walked toward the main road. He did not look back.

Others followed over the next hour. Berg, who said nothing to anyone and simply walked. Two men from Haugen's original platoon. Each made his calculation in his own way, and each walked with the particular quietness of men trying not to draw attention to a decision they had already committed to.

By the time the hour was done, six had gone to the road. Six remained.

Dahl moved to stand beside me. "I'm too old to start following German orders," he said.

"You're not that old," I said.

"Old enough."

Johansen was already there. He had posted his letter, done the only useful thing available to him in that regard, and here he was. Haugen stood apart, watching the men who remained,

counting them in the way he counted everything — precisely, without sentiment, establishing what he had to work with.

Three other men I had been fighting alongside for weeks: Lunde, who had a wife and children and had chosen this anyway; Bergmann, who had not spoken about his reasons and would not; and Pettersen, who was a schoolteacher from Ålesund and had the kind of stubborn quiet that schoolteachers sometimes had.

Nine men. Where once we had been thirty.

I shouldered my Krag-Jørgensen. The rifle was old and scarred and familiar in a way that had passed beyond mere instrument and had become something else — part of the inventory of my own body, as much a part of how I moved through the world as my own hands.

The eastern forest was dark and dense and had been Norwegian for longer than anyone in it could account for.

As dusk fell I walked toward it. Behind me was Kristian's grave and the uniforms and ranks and protocols of the Norwegian Army and the particular version of the fight that had ended today. Ahead was the other kind.

But also resistance.

For now, that was enough.

CHAPTER 5

Left Behind

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The eastern forest gathered us in like ghosts.

Men stepped silently from behind trees, emerged from shadows, rifles held ready until recognition settled across their faces. By midnight we numbered twenty-three. Former soldiers of a surrendered army, held together by nothing but refusal.

The cabin was not large. Twenty-three men filled it past comfortable capacity, the air thick with damp clothing and the particular smell of men who had been moving hard for hours. Haugen had a single oil lamp turned low, a map on the rough-hewn table, a photograph of King Haakon VII pinned to the

wall beside it. Someone had written one word beneath the photograph: *Troskap*. Loyalty.

Haugen briefed us on the checkpoints, the house-to-house searches, the timeline before the Germans expanded outward from Narvik. Three days, perhaps. Then he laid out the next moves: north, into the mountains, pairs, different routes, rendezvous at the old mining camp by sunset tomorrow.

The men took the information in with the trained attention of soldiers and then did not quite know what to do with it. This was not how soldiers behaved after a briefing. There were no orders to follow, no duties to report to, no structure waiting on the other side of the information. Haugen had given us the practical shape of the next twenty-four hours and then said *get what sleep you can*, and the getting of sleep was not what the room wanted to do.

I watched them in the lamplight. Eriksen, the radio operator, sitting with his kit on his lap as though ensuring contact between himself and the last functional thing he had been responsible for. Lunde, who had a wife and children in Ålesund and had chosen this over the road to surrender, looking at his hands. Bergmann, who had never told anyone why he had chosen to stay and showed no sign of starting, cleaning his rifle in the corner with the economy of motion he brought to everything. Pettersen the schoolteacher from Ålesund, sitting with his back very straight in the way that people of a certain disposition maintained their posture as a form of control when other forms of control were unavailable.

And several men from neighbouring platoons whom I knew only slightly — men whose names I had learned and whose

faces had become familiar over weeks of shared positions and shared meals and shared cold, and who were now here in this cabin because they had been in the eastern forest at dusk, and the choice was as simple and as complicated as that.

None of us were soldiers anymore. The army had surrendered. The ranks, the protocols, the chain of command reaching upward to a government now in exile — all of it had dissolved, and what was left was this: twenty-three men in a cabin, holding rifles, deciding to keep holding them without anyone requiring it of them.

The strange lightness of that was something I had not expected. And the strangeness of the lightness. I had expected the dissolution of structure to feel like falling, and instead it felt more like standing in a doorway, the old room behind and the new one not yet visible, and the standing being its own thing.

Dahl had no visible reaction to any of it, which was its own kind of steadiness.

• • •

I stepped outside needing the cold air and the dark and the space to let the past several days find their proper shape.

The northern sky was clear, stars scattered thick from horizon to horizon, the kind of sky the mountains produced in the absence of smoke and flares. No German lights. No artillery from over the ridge. Just the soft movement of pine needles in a small wind coming off the heights.

I found a fallen log and sat with it. The British evacuation. The ships going dark on the water. Kristian, and the sniper's

bullet that had arrived without any particular drama in the moment and had been arriving again and again ever since. The surrender order. Mikkelsen leaning his rifle carefully against a log. The eastern forest gathering twenty-three men in the dark.

Each of these things was real. None of them had fully landed yet. The body had a way of deferring the large things, parcelling them out in manageable quantities, and I understood this was a service it performed but it was also a debt that would need paying later.

Dahl emerged from the dark and settled beside me with the particular grunt he had for acknowledging the physical inconveniences of his age without complaining about them. We sat in silence for a while, looking at the same dark mountains.

"I fought in the Great War," he said, when he was ready. "Thought that would be the only one I'd see. That my children would get a better world." A short, humourless sound. "Here I am. Old enough to be your father."

"Do you have children?"

"A son. In Oslo." A pause that had some weight in it. "Haven't heard from him since the invasion. His mother died years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Worry doesn't help him. Action might." He turned to look at me — his face barely visible in the darkness, but I had learned to read Dahl through inflection and posture as much as expression. "That's why we're here, Solberg. Not just to resist the Germans. To preserve something worth returning to when they're gone."

"If they're gone," I said.

"When," he replied. No hesitation, no performance. Just the calm certainty of a man who had filed this under *obvious* and saw no reason to revisit the filing. "Empires rise and fall. Occupations begin and end. Norway was here before there was a Germany. It will be here after their flags are taken down."

I could not tell whether he believed it entirely or was certain I needed to hear it. Either way, I was grateful. Dahl had the quality of a man who never said things he did not mean, which made the things he said land differently from things said by men who might mean them or might not.

"Get some sleep," he said, rising. "Tomorrow begins a different kind of war."

He went inside.

I sat for a while longer, looking at the stars over the mountains, and tried to make peace with the fact that everything I had understood about my life for the past several weeks — the army, the alliance, the conventional fight — had ended, and whatever came next had not yet told me its name.

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Dawn found me moving north through the forest with Johansen.

We had spoken little since the night of the eastern approach, but something had settled between us in the silence — the particular bond of men who have been through the same thing and come out the other side in different shapes. Johansen

was quieter than he had been even before, which for a man who had always been quiet was saying something. He moved through the forest with his head slightly down, thinking.

We followed a stream northward, keeping to the tree cover, stopping to listen when the terrain opened or the wind shifted. The morning was cool and clear, the forest doing its ordinary work of being a forest — birdsong at the higher reaches, the creak of a pine somewhere above us, the sound of water over stones. Indifferent, as always, to everything happening in it.

Around midday we stopped to eat what we were carrying. Dried fish, hard biscuits, stream water drawn through a cloth. Not much. Enough.

"My family's farm is about twenty kilometres east," Johansen said. He was looking at the stream, not at me. "Small place. Sheep, mostly. Some crops."

I had been expecting this. Or something like it. "You're thinking of going there."

He nodded, not meeting my eyes. "My parents are elderly. My sister helps them, but she's alone with it now. Under German occupation, without…" He left the rest unsaid, but the shape of it was clear enough.

I looked at him. He was perhaps twenty-two — I had never asked his exact age — with the steady competence of someone raised to physical work and the particular solidity of a person who did not speak unless he had something to say. He had held the eastern approach beside us. He had kept his rifle steady and his breathing even and he had done what was required. He had posted his letter before the communications unit left and had shown up in the eastern forest at dusk.

He was not a man who made choices carelessly.

"Whatever you decide," I said, "no one will think less of you."

He looked at me directly for the first time in several hours. "Would you go? If your family were nearby?"

The question found the exact place it was meant to find. My parents were in Trondheim, firmly under German control since the early weeks. I had heard nothing from them since before the mobilisation — not a word, not a rumour, not any confirmation that they were safe or that my service had not brought German attention to their door. I thought about them in the spaces between things. My father's boat at the Narvik harbour, or wherever it was now. My mother's kitchen. The bread she had made the morning of April the ninth.

"I don't know," I said. "I'd like to believe I'd stay and fight for all of Norway, not just my own people. But I can't say for certain from outside that choice."

He seemed to value the honesty more than a cleaner answer would have given him. "I'll come to the rendezvous," he said after a moment. "Decide there."

We moved on.

The encounter with the German patrol came two hours later, when the tree cover thinned and the ground opened to a small clearing. I had raised my hand at the sound of voices and we had dropped and crawled forward until we could see without being seen.

Two soldiers, relaxed, weapons slung, consulting a map. A routine patrol, not expecting trouble. One pointed at the

terrain, the other traced something with his finger, both focused on the map.

I signalled Johansen: retreat, find another route. We began backing carefully, weight on each foot before committing. His boot caught a stone. It clattered softly, briefly, down the slope.

One of the Germans looked up sharply. "*Wer ist da? Zeigen Sie sich!*"

We froze. The soldiers exchanged a word. One began moving toward us while the other covered.

"We'll have to take them," I whispered, thinking through the angles.

A shot from above. Clean, single. The approaching soldier went down into the undergrowth without a sound. His companion spun toward the direction of the shot, searching, hand coming up to his weapon, and a second shot took him before he found what he was looking for.

The clearing returned to silence. I was aware of my own breathing.

"Don't move." A woman's voice, from the tree line, in Norwegian. "Identify yourselves."

"Former soldiers of the Norwegian Army. Under Lieutenant Haugen."

A pause. The sound of movement through the undergrowth above us, careful and unhurried. Someone who knew how to move.

"Stand slowly. Hands visible."

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She came out of the trees with a hunting rifle carried in the easy manner of someone who had grown up with one — held ready but not raised, the muzzle naturally indexed downward and away until it wasn't, which was a distinction that told you a great deal about how someone handled a firearm. Dark hair pulled back practically. Clothing worn for function, not warmth. Perhaps twenty-five.

She looked at us with the assessment of a person who had been making quick judgements about strangers for some time and had gotten good at it.

"Ingrid Nilsen," she said, lowering the rifle but not shouldering it. "Local resistance. You're heading to the mining camp."

"Yes."

"It's been swept. Germans went through this morning. Haugen changed the rendezvous yesterday — sent me north to intercept anyone coming up this route." She glanced at the two bodies in the clearing with the look of a person noting something that needed to be dealt with rather than reacting to it. "We need to move these. And then move ourselves."

She did not wait for agreement. She crossed to the nearer body, assessed the best way to handle it, and began dragging it toward the tree line. Johansen moved to help immediately. I took the second man.

We worked quickly, the three of us, pulling both bodies back into the undergrowth, covering them with dead branches and forest debris. She worked with the efficiency of someone

who had done this before, which I found I did not want to think about too carefully.

"They'll be missed when they don't report," I said.

"Yes. We have maybe three hours." She looked at the ground, at where the boots had dragged, at the small signs of disturbance that were unavoidable. "Good enough, if no one looks closely." She picked up her rifle. "Jensen's hunting cabin, west of here. Follow me."

She moved into the forest and we followed.

She navigated without hesitation, choosing paths I could not see until I was on them, the kind of intimate knowledge of terrain that takes years to build. She set a pace that was fast enough to be purposeful and measured enough to be sustainable, and she moved with a quality I had seen in Dahl — that complete absence of wasted motion that meant she was never catching up to where she needed to be, she was already there.

"You're local?" I said, as we walked.

"Born near Narvik. My father taught me to hunt this forest when I was a girl." A brief pause. "He's gone now. Two years."

"I'm sorry."

"He had a good life." She stepped over a root without breaking stride. "He would have hated this, what's happened. But he would have understood what we're doing."

"How did you end up running intercepts for Haugen?"

She glanced back at me. "I didn't join anything, if that's what you're asking. When the Germans came, I hid my brother

— he'd been in the merchant navy, they were registering anyone with naval experience. Other families had the same problem. We started sharing information, then resources, then coordination. Before long there was a network." Another brief pause. "I didn't plan to be part of a resistance organisation. It's more that the situation made one around me and I was already in the middle of it."

"And the — " I stopped. I was going to ask about the two men in the clearing. I did not ask.

She understood what I hadn't said. "It's not something I don't think about," she said. "But it's something I can do. So I do it."

• • •

The hunting cabin sat tucked against a rocky hillside, its chimney smoke dispersed quickly by the breeze. Inside, Haugen and a dozen others had arrived before us, along with several people I did not recognise — local civilians, at least two of them women, who had the manner of people operating in familiar territory.

A hand-drawn map of the region covered one wall, marked with symbols I could not yet read. The symbols told me that whoever had made the map had been at this work for some time, long enough to develop a system for it.

Haugen acknowledged our arrival. His eyes went to Ingrid. "Trouble?"

"Two scouts. Dealt with. Bodies concealed, but they'll be searched for."

"First light, then." He gestured us toward the table. "We were discussing next steps."

The discussion that followed was not the tidy operational briefing of a functioning military unit. It was something more organic and less certain — people with different kinds of knowledge about different parts of the problem, trying to fit those pieces together. Larsen, a weathered fisherman, knew the islands and the coastal approaches. An older woman whose name I learned was Margit knew every household in a thirty-kilometre radius and which ones could be trusted and which could not, and she conveyed this knowledge with the brisk confidence of someone who had long since worked out which judgements in her life were worth trusting. Ingrid knew the forest routes and the German patrol patterns she had been tracking for weeks.

Haugen listened more than he spoke, which was different from the way he had run a platoon. He was learning what he had to work with.

"Immediate priority is survival and organisation," he said, when he had heard enough to form a direction. "Safe houses, supply caches, communication routes. Once those exist, we can think about more active operations."

"And meanwhile the Germans consolidate," Bergmann said — the first words I had heard him say since the surrender. His voice had an edge that was not quite criticism but was aware of the cost of patience.

"Consolidation takes time," Ingrid said. "Time we can use." She looked at the map on the wall. "The more they extend their control, the more surface area they have for us to work against."

Bergmann looked at her, at the map, and sat back. Not satisfied, exactly. But not arguing.

"Those who stay on the mainland," said Margit — her voice carrying the particular authority of someone who had been managing difficult situations for decades longer than anyone else in the room — "need a way to continue their lives without drawing German attention. That means their work here stays invisible. Which means it has to look like nothing to people who don't know what they're looking at."

"The opposite problem from soldiers," Pettersen said. He had a schoolteacher's instinct for articulating the structure of a problem. "We were trained to be seen, to hold ground, to make our presence known. Now we need to be invisible."

"Not entirely invisible," Ingrid said. "Just invisible to the right people."

The planning built itself not into a grand strategy but into a patchwork of specific, practical things — the fisherman's boat and its eight-person capacity, the safe houses Margit could vouch for, the radio equipment Eriksen had salvaged and could operate, the routes Ingrid knew that left no trace.

Later, when the practical shape of the plan had been established and most of the men had found their sleeping places on the floor, I was standing at the wall map, trying to read the system of symbols Ingrid had developed, when she appeared beside me.

"The circles are safe houses," she said quietly. "The crosses are German checkpoints as of three days ago. The lines between them are routes — solid means confirmed, dotted means provisional."

I studied the map. There were more safe houses than I had expected, and more of the dotted lines than the solid ones, which was an honest representation of the state of the thing.

"My father served in the Royal Guards before the Great War," she said, after a moment. She was not looking at the map but at the photograph of King Haakon on the wall beside it. "He always said King Haakon understood Norway better than many who were born here."

"I heard he's in London now. With the government."

"He is." A pause. "Still our King. Not the puppet the Germans want to install. Not Quisling, or whatever comes after Quisling." The hardness in her voice was not anger but conviction, the harder and more durable thing. "Every action we take here, every patrol we disrupt, every person we keep out of a German registration office — it's in his name. That makes us soldiers still, not bandits, whatever the Germans choose to call us."

The distinction mattered. Not legally, perhaps, or not primarily legally — but for what we told ourselves at night about what we were doing and why. A resistance fighter operating under a legitimate government in exile was a different thing from a man with a rifle and a grievance. The difference was invisible to a German patrol that caught you, but it was not invisible to you.

I had not thought about it in those terms before. I added it to the pile of things Ingrid had made clear to me in the hours since I had met her.

• • •

I was standing outside again later, the cabin behind me, the darkness complete under cloud cover.

"You should rest," Ingrid said, from a few metres away. I had not heard her come out.

"Same to you."

"Fair point." She came to stand a little closer. Her voice dropped. "You're Solberg. The one who speaks English."

"Erik," I said. I was tired of surnames. "And yes. Though it feels less useful without the British."

"Don't assume that." She was quiet for a moment. "There are ways to get messages out. The British may have withdrawn their troops, but they haven't withdrawn their interest in Norway. They'll want information. They'll want to maintain contact with people who can get it for them."

"You have connections to British intelligence?"

"Not directly. But people I trust have contact with people who do." A pause. "Your English isn't just a communication tool. It's a credential, in certain conversations. When the time comes, it will matter."

"Then I'll be ready."

The silence between us was comfortable in the specific way of silences between people who are not performing anything for each other. The cold came off the mountains in the way it always did, and somewhere above the clouds the stars were doing what they always did, and it was quiet in the forest in the way that was different from silence by day.

"I heard about Kristian Olsen," she said, without preparation. "I'm sorry."

His name, spoken by someone I had met hours ago in a dark forest, caught me somewhere I had not expected to be caught. "You knew him?"

"Same school, years back. He was older than me." A brief pause. "He used to argue with the teachers. Not badly — he just always wanted to know why something was true, not just that it was true." A slight warmth in her voice. "He was kind. Even when he was being difficult."

I thought of Kristian the way you think of someone recently gone — in fragments, each one arriving before you're ready. The boy who had jumped into the cold fjord after me because he had decided we should suffer together. The man who had pressed a chocolate bar on Ingrid's section of the camp with the minimum of ceremony that still qualified as courtesy. The soldier in his last minutes, telling me to continue with each word costing him something.

"He was certain Norway would never truly fall," I said. "Even at the end. He'd have hated the surrender. But he'd have understood this." I meant the cabin, the maps, the patchwork of ordinary people deciding not to stop.

"Then we owe it to him to prove him right." Her hand found my arm in the darkness — a brief, firm pressure, the touch of a person who was not sentimental but understood that some things needed a physical acknowledgement — and then she was moving back toward the cabin.

I stood there for a while longer, letting the cold be what it was.

The shock and grief were not gone and would not be gone for some time. But alongside them something else had taken shape — not hope exactly, too fragile for that word, but the precursor to it. A sense that what I was doing here had a shape and a purpose that I had not yet seen whole, and that the not-yet-seeing it whole was not the same as it not being there.

• • •

When I went back inside, Johansen was sitting alone by the dying fire.

His face told me before he spoke.

"You're going to your family's farm," I said.

He nodded slowly, watching the embers. He had the expression of a man who has made a decision he is fully committed to and is not asking for anything except to be understood.

"At first light," he said.

"I understand." I sat down across from him. "I mean that genuinely, not as a form of words."

He looked up. "I know you do." A pause. "You asked me on the trail if I would go if my family were near. You didn't answer."

"I didn't know the answer."

"Do you know it now?"

I thought about it. My parents in Trondheim. My father at the end of the street, his hand raised. My mother's bread on the

counter. “I think,” I said carefully, “that I would want to go. And I think I would find a way to stay, and live with the wanting.” I looked at him. “I don’t know if that’s the better answer. I think it might just be a different one.”

He was quiet for a moment. “I’ve thought about it since you said you didn’t know. What I keep coming back to is that I can do more for Norway from my father’s farm than I can do in the forest. Not the same thing you’re doing. But something.” He paused. “My family, the neighbours, the people in the valley — if they have someone they can trust, who can move information between them and a network like this… that’s something.”

“It is,” I said. And I meant it. Margit’s role in the cabin tonight had made this clear enough — what she knew about the region and the people in it was its own form of resistance, not less important for being invisible.

“I won’t give anything away if I’m caught,” he said. “I’ll say I deserted before the surrender. Acting alone. Nobody connected to anything.”

“I trust that.”

He was quiet for a moment. Then, looking at the fire: “Tell Haugen. When I’m gone. Explain it to him the way you just explained it to me.”

“I will.”

He held out his hand. I shook it.

“Perhaps our paths cross again,” he said.

“I hope so.”

He settled back to watch the fire die. I found my sleeping place among the others and lay down in the dark, listening to the breathing of twenty-odd people who had all made some version of the same impossible choice and arrived at different specific places within it.

Johansen was gone when I woke at first light, his spot near the fire empty, the door drawn quietly closed behind him.

Outside, the forest was beginning to show itself in the early grey. Somewhere in the distance, my country was occupied and the work of resisting it was still not named and still not organised and still, somehow, underway.

I was no longer a soldier. The word for what I was instead had not yet arrived.

But I was not, it turned out, alone in being it.

CHAPTER 6

Survival Mode

• • •

The first month of resistance taught us a new language.

Watchwords and signals replaced military jargon. “The weather will be fine tomorrow” meant Germans patrolling the eastern roads. A scarf hung from a certain window indicated a safe house. A particular arrangement of fishing nets warned of Gestapo in the village. We learned to read the landscape not for tactical advantage but for information — the parked car that had not moved in three days, the shuttered shop that had been open every morning for thirty years, the child playing in a street that had been quietly cleared of every adult.

We moved like shadows between isolated farmhouses and concealed camps. Our small group from Narvik had merged with others — local hunters, fishermen, former soldiers — forming a loose network across the region. I rarely spent more than two nights in the same place. The discipline of this, the constant managed rootlessness, was its own kind of warfare against the self.

The Germans called us terrorists. Their posters covered village walls, offering rewards for information leading to our capture. We called ourselves Hjemmefronten — the Home Front — soldiers still fighting for King Haakon VII and a free Norway.

• • •

On a morning in late summer I found myself gutting fish on the weathered deck of Larsen's boat, anchored in a small cove sheltered by steep cliffs. The mundane work provided a veneer of normality. The weapons concealed under tarpaulins nearby told a different story.

Larsen worked beside me with the unhurried competence of a man who had been gutting fish for fifty years and had long since stopped thinking about the motion. He was sixty-three, though the number was misleading — he had the hands and the forearms of a man twenty years younger, built by decades of nets and lines and the particular strength required to haul things out of the sea. He had a fisherman's relationship to silence, which was to say he inhabited it comfortably and broke it only when he had something worth saying.

"You've improved," he said, watching my technique with an expression that was somewhere between approval and mild scepticism. "Almost as good as a fisherman's son should be."

"My father would be surprised," I said. "I avoided this job when I could."

"What did you prefer?"

"Reading, mostly. Languages. Anything that happened sitting down."

A slight smile. "And now here you are. Gutting fish on a resistance boat in a cove above the Arctic Circle."

"Life is unpredictable."

He was quiet for a moment, working. "My boys loved the sea," he said. "Both of them. The elder — Magnus — he had your kind of mind, all books and questions. Still ended up on the water. Said the sea asked better questions than any book he'd read." He turned the fish in his hands with the automatic precision of long practice. "Sigurd, the younger one, he just loved it. No philosophy about it. He was happy on the water the way some men are happy with a woman or a drink. It was just what he was."

I had known that Larsen had lost two sons earlier in the war — it had come up in a briefing early on, noted as context for why he could be trusted completely, a man with nothing left to lose except the cause — but I had not heard him speak of them directly.

"How old were they?" I asked.

"Magnus was twenty-eight. Sigurd twenty-four." He did not stop working. "Magnus went down with his merchant vessel in the first weeks — a German submarine, mid-Atlantic. Sigurd was killed in the naval engagement at Narvik. Second battle, April the thirteenth." He paused. "I was here, in this cove, when I heard about Sigurd. Same week."

"I'm sorry," I said. The words were inadequate, and he knew it, and I knew he knew it, and neither of us required more from them than they could give.

"They knew what the sea was," he said after a moment. "Not a romance. Not an adventure. A thing that provides and kills without preference. You work with it honestly and it lets you live. Usually." He set the gutted fish aside. "I don't know why I'm still alive when they're not. I stopped trying to understand that."

"Does it matter? That you're still alive?"

He looked at me sideways. "That's the question, isn't it. I've decided it does. Not for any deep reason. Just that while I'm here, I can do things. Move people. Move supplies. Know the water in ways that the Germans don't and can't." He gestured at the cove, the cliffs, the particular grey quality of the water. "This is my country. Every inlet, every current, every place you can hide a boat and every place you can't. That knowledge is worth something. As long as it's worth something, I'm useful. As long as I'm useful, it seems worth staying."

It was the most he had said to me in the weeks I had known him, and it arrived without any apparent self-consciousness — the way things are said by people who have already thought

them through completely and are merely conveying the conclusion.

"My father thinks the same way," I said. "Not about the sea, exactly. But about usefulness."

"Sounds like a sensible man."

"He is."

Larsen returned to his fish and I returned to mine, and the cove was quiet around us except for the water and the sound of the work, and I thought about my father on the *Sigrid* in the early morning of April the ninth, turning the boat keys over in his hand.

• • •

"Boat approaching," Dahl called from his lookout on the rocky outcrop above. "Small. Single occupant."

We tensed, hands moving instinctively. Betrayal and carelessness had already claimed too many in the network. Vigilance was not caution anymore — it was simply the cost of being alive.

"It's Ingrid," Dahl added, lowering his binoculars.

The tension eased, though not entirely. An unscheduled arrival meant urgent news.

She guided her rowboat alongside with practised ease, her face showing the particular flatness of someone who has been moving hard for a long time and is running on will rather than energy. I helped her aboard and offered her coffee.

She accepted it without ceremony. “Needed to avoid the checkpoints. They’ve doubled patrols along the main roads.”

“New commanding officer,” Larsen said. “Trying to make an impression.”

“Obersturmführer Wagner. SS, not Wehrmacht.” She wrapped both hands around the cup. “He’s reassigning resources. Focused on rooting out resistance rather than maintaining order.”

The distinction mattered. Wehrmacht officers operated within military convention, could be navigated around, occasionally looked the other way. SS officers were ideological in a way that left no gaps.

“Any specific targets?” Haugen asked, emerging from the cabin.

“Us, eventually. But his immediate priority seems to be supply lines. British air drops have increased in the north. He wants to cut them off.”

The RAF drops had been irregular but critical — containers of weapons, ammunition, radio components, medical supplies, delivered at night to coordinates passed through our communication channels with London. Without them, effective resistance would become nearly impossible.

“There’s more,” Ingrid continued. “Allied commandos may attempt coastal landings. Small raids, specific German installations.”

“Reliable?” Haugen asked.

"As reliable as anything, these days. From someone connected to the government in London."

"If it's true," Dahl said, "the Germans will clamp down harder."

"They'll try. Which is why we need to move the main supply cache at Fyresdal. It's exposed now that Wagner is focusing on interdiction." She set the cup down. "Jensen was arrested three days ago. Him and his wife and eldest son."

The news settled heavily. Jensen had been meticulous and careful, a former police officer whose security knowledge had underpinned the communication network from the beginning.

"Betrayed?"

Ingrid shook her head. "Bad luck. A routine document check caught him with forged papers. They don't know his significance yet. But they will."

"Then we move the supplies tonight," Haugen decided. He looked at Larsen. "Sea approach?"

"Four men," Larsen confirmed. "Less exposure."

"Solberg, Eriksen — you're with Larsen. Dahl, you and I make a diversion near the main road."

As preparations began around us, Ingrid touched my arm. "Something else. Personal."

My chest tightened the way it always did when a conversation took that direction. "My family?"

"Your parents are alive, Erik."

She said it simply, with no preparation, and it hit me with precisely the force that simple true statements carry when you have been holding the alternative possibility at a careful distance for months.

I was aware of the railing under my hands. The cold of it. The fjord beyond the cove, grey and flat. I had not realised how much weight I had been carrying until a fraction of it lifted, and the lifting itself told me the weight's shape.

"Trondheim?" I managed.

"Yes. Under surveillance because of your service — they haven't been harassed, but they're watched. Your father was questioned once in the first weeks and apparently managed the conversation well. Gave them nothing useful, looked cooperative enough that they moved on." She paused. "The contact I spoke to said your mother has not changed very much."

I had not thought about what *not changed very much* would mean to me until I heard it and understood that it meant she was still herself in the specific way she had always been herself — practical, precise, the two words rather than the ten when two would do. *Come back*. Not a plea, not a command. A statement of what she required of the world.

"They don't know where I am?" I asked.

"No. That's protective for them. The Germans can't pressure people for information they don't have."

I stood at the railing for a moment, not talking, letting this settle into whatever part of me had been holding it at bay. My father on the *Sigrid* the morning of April the ninth, the boat

keys turning in his hand. My mother in the kitchen with the bread. The corner of the street where my father had stopped and raised his hand and I had looked back once.

They were still there. The corner was still there. The kitchen, presumably, was still there.

The fact of it was large enough that I did not have anywhere useful to put it immediately, and so I simply held it and let the fjord be what it was in front of me.

"Erik," Ingrid said, after a moment.

"I'm here."

"There's more. The British want to extract someone from Trondheim — a physicist who's been forced to work on German projects. They need someone who knows the city and speaks English."

"Me."

She nodded. "Your decision. You'd be away from regular operations for at least two weeks. The timing is difficult with Jensen gone and Wagner newly installed. But it may also establish a more permanent line with British intelligence. Haugen thinks it's worth considering."

The chance to be near Trondheim — even without direct contact, even unable to stand in my parents' street or knock on their door — was something I had not let myself want until she said it. And underneath the wanting was something more complicated: the knowledge that wanting it was itself a vulnerability, a reason to be careful about saying yes.

"I'll talk to Haugen," I said. "Tonight's operation first."

She moved away to help Eriksen with the radio equipment. I turned toward the water and breathed.

My parents were alive. My father had looked cooperative and revealed nothing. My mother had not changed very much.

I stayed with this information for a long moment, letting it find its shape in me. Then I picked up my fish and went back to work.

• • •

Night fell with fog rolling in from the sea.

Larsen's boat moved silently along the coastline, engine muffled by improvised baffles, its running lights dark. Eriksen navigated by landmarks — a cliff face that caught the faint starlight, a particular shape of headland, the sound of water on specific rocks. I sat near the bow with a Sten gun across my knees, British-made and reliable enough in most conditions but prone to jamming in wet cold.

The fourth man was Petersen, a newcomer vouched for by Ingrid, a former dock worker who knew these inlets nearly as well as Larsen.

"Five minutes," Larsen murmured. "Haugen and Dahl should be starting the diversion."

As if in answer, a distant flash lit the fog to the east, followed seconds later by a muffled thump — the bridge on the supply road, far enough to draw German attention, close enough to spread their forces.

"That's our cue." Larsen guided us into a narrow inlet, invisible until we were inside it.

The keel scraped gently on rock. We moved with the efficiency of men who had done this before — Eriksen securing the boat, Petersen and I unloading the empty crates. Larsen stayed aboard.

"Thirty minutes," he said quietly. "No longer."

The cache was four hundred metres inland in an abandoned boathouse — close to the water for transport, far enough from the coastal patrols. We moved in the fog by memorised landmarks, no lights, no speech, the shapes of trees and rocks reading differently at night than they did by day and requiring a different kind of attention.

The boathouse materialised suddenly from the dark, its weathered timbers almost indistinguishable from the surrounding night. Petersen led us to the concealed rear entrance.

Inside: damp wood, old fish smell, the deliberate camouflage of long disuse. Under the warped floorboards — weapons, ammunition, medical equipment, radio components. We loaded quickly: ammunition for the various weapons our cells ran, medical supplies always in desperate need, the specialised radio parts for maintaining contact with London.

"Morse tonight," Eriksen whispered. "Two clicks, pause, three if there's trouble."

We had filled three crates when a vehicle engine penetrated the fog. Not close, but approaching — a German patrol casting a wider net than the diversion had been intended to occupy.

"Continue loading," I said. "Be ready."

The engine stopped roughly five hundred metres away, near the road skirting the shoreline. Voices, orders. A search pattern — I recognised the approach from training that had happened in another life.

"Five minutes before they reach us."

We abandoned precision for speed, filling the last crate with whatever had the most value and preparing the rest for denial — nothing left intact for the Germans to examine. Then the dogs began.

Dogs changed everything. Fog was no cover against scent.

"Eriksen, signal Larsen. Two clicks."

He slipped outside. Nothing came back.

"Again."

Still nothing.

Larsen would not abandon position without warning. He had either been forced offshore and couldn't respond without giving himself away, or something had happened to him at the boat.

"They may have found him," Petersen said quietly.

The Germans were less than two hundred metres away.

"New plan. Supplies to the secondary cache. Then split. Different routes to Olsen's farm."

The secondary cache was a small cave in the rocky hillside above — less convenient but defensible. We had prepared it months ago for exactly this contingency.

We moved uphill through broken terrain, using the cover the hillside offered, the weight of the crates slowing us. The crates had to come. They represented weeks of dangerous air operations and the lives of the men who had made them.

"*There!*" A German voice, and the dogs went frantic. Movement spotted through the thinning fog.

"Go!" I said. "I'll delay them."

Eriksen turned. "We stay together."

"Get the supplies to the cave. Meet at Olsen's." I passed my crate to Petersen. "That's an order."

They went.

I dropped behind a rocky outcrop with the Sten and turned to face the approaching torchlight. Not to kill — not yet. To buy time and confusion. I fired a short burst above their heads.

Shouting, lights out, return fire spraying wide into the dark. I had what I needed: uncertainty, cover, the time while they reorganised. I rolled several metres sideways and fired again from the new position. They returned fire at where I had been.

Well-trained, following protocol. Which made them predictable.

The dogs were the real problem. They would not be confused by simple position changes. Their barking was pulling the handlers toward me despite the chaos.

I gave ground steadily uphill, firing in short bursts, changing position after each one. The hillside offered good cover — rocks, depressions, fallen timber — and I used all of it, making myself seem like more men than I was. A dog came

through the fog less than ten metres away, handler close behind. I fired once. The necessity of it had long since stopped requiring justification, though it had never stopped costing something.

I broke contact when the Germans began spreading to flank. Moving fast uphill then north, putting distance between myself and the torches until the voices faded and there was only the fog and the dark and the sound of my own breathing.

The journey to Olsen's farm took nearly two hours — wide detours around checkpoints, careful crossings of open ground. Dawn was beginning to grey the sky when the farmhouse appeared in its small valley.

I used the recognition signal and waited. Anna Olsen opened the door a fraction, her face tight with the particular expression of a woman who has sent men into the dark and is counting them back.

"Quickly," she said.

Inside: the wall of kitchen warmth, the smell of coffee, Eriksen at the table. Alive. No Petersen — he had continued north with the supplies to reach Haugen.

"Larsen?" I asked.

The expression on Eriksen's face was the answer.

Anna disappeared to the root cellar and came back with bread and cold meat and set them down without comment, the way she managed everything — without ceremony, without requiring acknowledgement, simply doing what was needed. She had a quality I had come to associate with certain people in the resistance, women especially: a complete absence of drama

around things that deserved drama, which was different from not feeling them.

"Clean clothes in the back room," she said. "You'll stay today and move after dark."

Not a question. I had learned not to offer objections to Anna Olsen's practical decisions, because her practical decisions were consistently correct.

We ate. After a time, Eriksen leaned across the table. "The British extraction. Ingrid mentioned it."

"You know about it."

"Enough." He turned his coffee cup in his hands. "Trondheim is heavily garrisoned. The Gestapo presence there is different from what we deal with here."

"I know Trondheim."

"That's my point. People who know you could recognise you. A face out of context, on the wrong street, at the wrong moment."

"A different identity helps with that."

"It helps. It's not the same as eliminating the risk." He looked at me directly — Eriksen did not approach things indirectly. "I'm not arguing against it. I'm saying go in with your eyes open."

"My family is there," I said. "That's part of it. Not all, but part."

He accepted this with the practical acknowledgement he gave to things he understood even when he would have decided differently. "When you come back," he said, "we'll need the

radio intelligence more than anything. Patrol schedules, checkpoint positions, communication frequencies."

"I know what I'm going for."

"I know you do." He picked up his coffee again. "I just want to be useful."

That was Eriksen's way — the specific offer of skills and attention rather than anything more expressive. It was, I realised, the same quality Larsen had had. The same habit of making themselves useful rather than simply present.

After Anna cleared the table, I found the back room and slept.

• • •

I slept through the day and woke to darkness and Haugen's voice.

He stood over the bed in the faint light from the covered window. He had the careful stillness of a man about to say something he has carried for hours.

"Larsen's dead."

He let the words sit for a moment before continuing.

"His boat was found drifting. Empty. The Germans are claiming a resistance fighter was killed attempting to flee a patrol."

I sat up slowly. "Confirmed?"

"One of our people in the village recognised the boat." He held out something — Larsen's cap, salt-stained and weathered

from decades at sea. A bullet hole in the crown. Dark staining around it. “A fisherman delivered it. Said he’d found it in his nets.”

I took the cap. The weight of it was wrong — too light, the way objects become wrong when they’re separated from the person who owned them.

“They’re returning his body to the village tomorrow,” Haugen said. “As a warning.”

I did not say anything immediately. I was thinking of the cove that morning, Larsen working beside me, talking about his sons with the same matter-of-fact composure he applied to everything. *Magnus was twenty-eight. Sigurd twenty-four.* He had said it the way you state facts about the weather or the tide — true things that don’t require any particular framing because the framing would be redundant.

And the thing he had said about usefulness. *While I’m here, I can do things.* A calculation that had been his alone to make, and that he had made, and that had brought him to the cove and then to the boat and then to whatever had happened in the dark fog on the water.

“He knew the risk,” I said.

“He did,” Haugen agreed. “He would not have been there if he hadn’t.”

The cap was still in my hands. I set it carefully on the bed beside me, as though it still needed to be treated gently.

“A few of us should go to the village tomorrow,” I said. “Dispersed among the crowd. Pay our respects.”

"Yes." A pause. "The supplies reached the northern group safely. Dahl's bridge diversion worked. The Germans will have disrupted supply lines for at least a week." He said this as what it was — not consolation, not an accounting, but a statement of what Larsen's last operation had accomplished.

"And Trondheim?" I asked.

He sat down on the edge of the bed in the way of a man who has decided this conversation deserves more than a doorway.

"The British want regular intelligence from Trondheim alongside the extraction," he said. "Not just this mission — a more permanent presence. Someone embedded who can report on shipping movements, troop rotations, new fortifications. They're building toward something larger in the north."

"My parents," I said. "I won't put them in the path of it."

"You'd operate under a separate identity, different part of the city. No contact with anyone who knows you." He looked at me steadily. "I won't tell you there's no risk. You know Trondheim, you know the people, and that's both an asset and a liability."

"When do I leave?"

"Three days. Civilian worker transport — the Germans are bringing in labourers for the submarine pen construction. Ingrid will handle your documentation." He paused. "The British requested you by name. Apparently Captain Blackwood spoke to someone with memory for details."

Blackwood. Standing on the deck of the transport ship with the fjord behind him, a small figure at a distance. Whether he

had seen my raised hand that evening I had never known. Apparently he had been thinking about me regardless.

"Tell him he's forgiven," I said, and then felt the inadequacy of it, and let it stand anyway.

After Haugen left I sat alone in the small attic room with Larsen's cap on the bed beside me.

I thought of him in the cove that morning, turning the fish with automatic hands and talking about Magnus and Sigurd in the same level voice he had used to discuss caches and patrol patterns. He had not made a thing of it. He had simply said what was true and then returned to work, which was how he had apparently always done everything that mattered.

Outside, dawn was doing what dawn did over the occupied country, which was to say it arrived without consultation and without permission and lit up the same landscape it had been lighting up for longer than anyone could account for. Wagner and his SS methods and his doubled patrols were a current thing. The landscape was a permanent one.

I made Larsen a promise, the same one I had made Kristian, the only promise available to me from here: that when the time came, the thing he had spent his last morning working toward would be worth what it had cost.

Then I began thinking about Trondheim.

CHAPTER 7

Resistance Beginnings

• • •

Trondheim had changed.

My hometown — once vibrant with fishing boats and merchant vessels, children running along the wharves, the constant noise of commerce and argument and life — now moved to the rhythm of German boots. Swastika flags hung from buildings I had known all my life. Checkpoints interrupted the flow of streets that had once required no interruption. Residents walked with their heads down, conversations muted, a collective withdrawal into private life that was itself a form of resistance.

The Nidaros Cathedral still dominated the skyline with the indifference of something that had been there nine hundred years and expected to be there nine hundred more. I had grown up with that cathedral. It had always seemed to me the most Norwegian thing in Norway — not because it was beautiful, though it was, but because it had refused to be anything other than what it was through everything that had been thrown at it. Even the Germans, apparently, were not immune to it. They left it alone.

Everything else was changed or changing. The warehouses along the harbour where I had played as a boy now stored military supplies behind new barbed wire. The café where my father had occasionally taken me on school days — the one that had always smelled of strong coffee and cardamom buns — now served German officers who sat at the same tables and looked out the same windows at the fjord. The wharves were busy with a different kind of busy: military traffic, controlled, purposeful, nothing that was not accounted for by someone's ledger.

I observed all of this through unfamiliar eyes — those of Karl Bergman, a labourer from Oslo assigned to the submarine pen construction project. My hair had been darkened, a beard grown to change the shape of my face. Even my posture was different, the straight-backed military bearing replaced by the slight stoop of a man accustomed to physical work.

"Papers," said the German soldier at the final checkpoint before the workers' quarters. Young face, hard eyes.

I handed over the forged documents — meticulous work by a former bank employee now working exclusively for the

resistance. The soldier examined them with practised scrutiny, comparing the photograph to my face.

"First time in Trondheim?" he asked, in halting Norwegian.

"Yes," I replied, maintaining the slight eastern accent of my cover identity. "Better pay than Oslo. Worth the journey."

A practical motivation for a practical man. He waved me through.

The workers' quarters were hastily constructed barracks near the harbour, where Germany was expanding the submarine pens that anchored their Atlantic naval strategy. Hundreds of Norwegian labourers had been recruited or conscripted for the project — a mix of genuine workers and, increasingly, resistance members positioned to observe and report.

I found my assigned bunk in Barracks C and placed my few possessions in the small locker beside it. My bunkmate, a burly man who gave his name as Tomas, barely acknowledged my arrival. Minimal interaction, minimal risk — standard practice in a place where no one could be sure who was listening.

That evening, after a sparse meal in the workers' canteen, I ventured into the city. Workers were permitted limited movement during off-hours, the curfew applying to all Norwegians not holding special permits. I had three hours to make first contact.

Trondheim's streets were simultaneously familiar and foreign. The cathedral still dominated the skyline, its ancient stone untouched — perhaps even the Germans were not immune to it. The warehouses along the harbour where I had

played as a boy now stored military supplies. The café where my father had taken me on special occasions now served German officers.

I followed my memorised instructions, walking a circuitous route designed to reveal any surveillance. Three doublings back, one entrance and quick exit through a shop, one stop to re-lace my boot while checking window reflections. Satisfied, I made my way to Bakklandet, the old quarter with its traditional wooden houses.

The bookshop on the corner of Nedre Bakklandet was warm inside and smelled of old paper and binding glue — a small haven of ordinary life in an occupied city. An elderly woman sat behind the counter, peering over wire-rimmed spectacles.

"Can I help you find something?"

"I'm looking for something on local fishing history," I replied, using the agreed phrase. "My uncle worked the fjords before the war."

A slight narrowing of the eyes. "Perhaps Johansen's work would interest you. It's in the back."

She led me through a curtained doorway into a storage room. Only when the curtain fell behind us did her manner change.

"You must be Solberg," she said, barely above a whisper. "I'm Frøya."

"Karl Bergman," I corrected. "At least while we're in Trondheim."

She nodded. “Your contact arrives tomorrow. A Russian scientist — forced to work on German submarine communications systems.” She handed me a book, Johansen’s *History of Trøndelag Fishing*. “Page 47 has the details. Memorise, then burn the page.”

“My secondary mission?”

She moved to a different shelf and retrieved a hollowed-out book containing a small camera. “Three priority targets are marked in here. Photograph what you can, but the scientist takes precedence.”

I tucked both into my jacket. “Any word on family surveillance patterns?” I kept my tone even.

Her expression softened slightly. “The Solberg family on Fjordgata is watched but not closely. The father reports weekly to the Kommandantur as required. No unusual restrictions.”

My parents were doing what people under occupation learned to do — outward compliance, inner dignity intact. The safest path available to them.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Be careful. Wagner’s people have intensified informant recruitment. Trust no one you don’t absolutely have to.”

I left through a back entrance into a narrow alley, reverting immediately to surveillance procedures. The camera felt heavy against my ribs despite weighing almost nothing. Outside, I allowed myself a brief detour near Fjordgata — not close enough to see my parents’ home, just near enough to walk the streets where I had grown up. The familiar corners and buildings brought a wave of feeling I had not been prepared for.

A German patrol rounded the corner ahead. I adjusted immediately — shoulders dropping, eyes to the ground, a labourer too tired for anything beyond the next meal and bed. They passed without a glance.

Back in the barracks, I waited for the washroom to empty, then locked myself in a stall and turned to page 47 of the fishing history. The extraction details were embedded within an innocuous paragraph about herring migration patterns:

Meeting location: Cathedral Square, by the statue, 14:00 hours.

Recognition: Subject will carry Aftenposten folded lengthwise.

Response: Ask for directions to Munkegata 15.

Subject description: Male, 50–55, balding, wire glasses, grey coat.

Name to use: Professor Andersen.

Extraction window: 48 hours maximum.

I tore out the page, reduced it to pieces in the toilet, and flushed it away. The rest of the book was genuine fishing history — nothing that would not withstand inspection.

Sleep came fitfully. Unfamiliar sounds, the proximity of strangers, the weight of what tomorrow required. I had trained myself to function on minimal rest, but that night every hour felt earned.

• • •

Morning brought the harsh reality of my cover — physical labour at the submarine pen site. I joined the stream of workers filing toward the harbour, passed through the checkpoint, and spent the morning moving construction materials under the supervision of German engineers who showed no interest in us beyond the work getting done.

The cover was excellent. Moving materials gave me reason to cross the entire site without arousing suspicion, and I used every crossing to catalogue layout, security procedures, patrol patterns, and command structure. Military training made the assessment nearly automatic.

During the lunch break, an older worker settled at the end of my table — weathered hands, the manner of a man who had worked the sea. He chewed his bread slowly and said nothing.

"You're new," he observed eventually. "Oslo, right?"

"That's right."

He nodded, eating. "Three months here myself. Bergen originally."

I recognised the approach — information offered to elicit a response, the standard resistance method for identifying potential allies without explicit disclosure.

"Never been to Bergen," I replied neutrally. "Heard it rains all the time."

A slight smile. "That it does. Almost as much as it snows in Narvik."

The reference was deliberate — casual enough to sound innocent, specific enough to test me. He was either resistance or counterintelligence.

"Wouldn't know," I said. "Never been that far north. Too cold for my liking."

Disappointment crossed his features, quickly followed by something that looked like approval. I had refused to break cover despite the prompt. He finished his bread in silence and returned to work without another word.

By the end of the shift my hands were blistered and my back ached — a convincing physical record of my cover identity. I had also memorised the patrol schedule for the northern harbour section and noted the location of a signals building that would interest British intelligence considerably.

I changed into my slightly better civilian clothes and left forty-five minutes early for the cathedral square, following another surveillance detection route. The square offered good visibility — easy to spot surveillance — but limited escape routes if something went wrong. The constant flow of pedestrians provided anonymity and risk in equal measure.

I positioned myself near a shop window with a view of the statue, appearing to examine the meagre offerings behind the glass. Three German soldiers near the cathedral steps, a police officer directing traffic, civilians moving with the muted efficiency of life under occupation.

At precisely 14:00, a man entered from the eastern side. Grey coat, wire glasses, balding, the Aftenposten folded lengthwise. He paused by the statue with the slight anxiety of

someone meeting a stranger in circumstances that did not permit nervousness.

I approached, timing my movement around the German patrol completing its circuit.

"Excuse me — could you direct me to Munkegata 15?"

Relief behind the glasses. "Of course. I'm heading that way myself." Fluent Norwegian with a faint Slavic trace that most listeners would miss.

We walked side by side, maintaining the fiction of strangers sharing a route.

"The arrangements are confirmed?" he asked quietly, eyes forward.

"Yes, Professor Andersen. Extraction in forty-eight hours."

"My work schedule creates a window tomorrow night. After that, new security protocols apply to the research team."

"We'll be ready. Do you have the technical documents?"

His hand brushed his inside pocket. "Everything requested. Submarine communication protocols, experimental sonar countermeasures."

Your navy, I noted — not *our navy*. A reminder that this man was not Norwegian, not fighting for my country's freedom, but using our network to escape his own situation. Still, his information would help the Allied cause, and by extension Norway's liberation. The calculation was straightforward enough.

"The meeting point is the old fishing warehouse at Nyhavna," I said. "Midnight tomorrow. Come alone, bring only essentials."

"I understand." His hands were trembling slightly, the only visible concession to what this cost him.

We approached a checkpoint and I separated smoothly, turning down a side street with a casual nod of thanks for the directions. The exchange had lasted less than three minutes.

I spent the afternoon photographing German coastal defences and harbour installations — two of the three priority targets by evening: a new radar installation and the harbour master's office where shipping schedules were processed. The third, a communications bunker, was too heavily guarded for the time I had available.

As dusk settled over the city, I found myself drawn toward Fjordgata despite every rational argument against it. I knew it was a mistake even as I made it. I had told myself, through the weeks of preparation and the days since arriving in Trondheim, that I would not do this. That the discipline the situation required extended to this above everything else. That seeing them would make nothing better and could make several things worse.

My feet went anyway.

I approached from the harbour side, using the lengthening shadows, the surveillance detection habits so ingrained by now that I ran through them without needing to think. My parents' house appeared between buildings as I came around the corner I had walked ten thousand times as a boy.

It stood much as I remembered. The blue paint faded — my father had been planning to repaint the year the invasion came, and clearly had not had occasion to since. The small front garden less tended than my mother would have preferred in ordinary times. A light burned in the kitchen window.

And there she was.

My mother, moving past the window. Setting the table for the evening meal exactly as she had done every day of my childhood, in the same motion she had probably been making since before I was born — the plates placed in the same order, the glasses after, whatever was practical and sufficient rather than ceremonial. She had never been ceremonial about meals. She had been practical about them, which was its own form of care.

I stood very still.

She did not look up. She had no reason to look at the street at that particular moment. She moved away from the window and was gone, and then she was at the window again briefly, and then gone once more.

My father would be in his chair by the radio, half-reading while listening for BBC broadcasts through the German jamming. That had been his habit before the war, the radio on low while he read, and I could not imagine occupation changing it — could not imagine occupation changing him, which was either hope or foolishness and from here the two looked similar.

The white picket fence. My father and I had built it the summer I turned fourteen, spending three weekends on it because neither of us was especially skilled with wood and we

kept having to redo sections. By the end of the third weekend we had been arguing companionably about the spacing of the posts, which was not quite level and which my father had decided to call character. It still leaned slightly at the same corner.

I could walk to that gate in approximately forty seconds.

Then I saw the car. A dark sedan parked two houses down, unmarked, engine off but with the particular stillness of a vehicle that was occupied rather than empty. Frøya had mentioned surveillance — not constant, but regular. Someone sitting in that car, possibly watching, more likely looking at a newspaper and waiting for the end of a shift, but there.

I turned away and walked.

My chest carried something for the next several blocks that I did not have a clean word for — not grief exactly, not longing exactly, not the sharp pain of loss because they were alive and thirty seconds away and I knew this. Something more like the weight of a door you have decided not to open. The decision was right. The door was still there.

I was halfway back to the workers' quarter when the voice came from behind me.

"You there. Stop."

I froze. Ran the options in the second available — run and confirm suspicion, stay and risk identification, fight and lose everything. None of them were good. I turned slowly.

A German officer, hand resting on his holstered pistol. Not the relaxed stance of a man conducting routine checks. Alert. Something had caught his attention.

"Papers," he said when he reached me.

I produced the forged documents, maintaining the mildly sullen manner of a conscripted worker who has been stopped before and finds it tedious rather than frightening.

He examined them with unusual thoroughness. "You're not assigned to this district. Curfew in thirty minutes. Why are you here?"

A direct question. The cover story had to be plausible, specific enough to seem real, vague enough that it could not be immediately checked.

"A woman," I said, putting embarrassment into my voice. "Norwegian girl from the canteen. Said she lived nearby." A shrug. "Gave me the wrong address, apparently. Or the wrong night."

The shift in his expression was almost immediate — suspicion easing toward amusement. "Looking for company, eh?" He handed back my papers with the manner of a man who has just reclassified the situation. "The approved establishments are in the harbour district. Cleaner and more reliable."

"Yes, sir," I muttered.

"Back to your quarters," he ordered, already moving on mentally. "Next time I'll have you detained for the night."

I walked away at the pace of a man who has been caught doing something embarrassing and wants to put distance between himself and the memory of it. Around the first corner. Around the second.

Then I stopped and stood with my back against a building wall for a moment.

The encounter had lasted perhaps ninety seconds. It had gone well. I had the cover story, the documents, the manner. It had gone exactly as training said it should go when it went well.

My hands were not entirely steady.

Not fear of what had just happened — I had processed that during the encounter itself, the way I had learned to process it, the way the body eventually accommodated the fact of constant risk without collapsing under it. Something else. The proximity of the house. My mother at the window. The white picket fence and the door I had not opened.

I had brought that with me into the encounter, and it had nearly been visible, and I had been lucky that the cover story had been the kind that required embarrassment rather than confidence, because embarrassment and the thing I was actually carrying are not entirely different from the outside.

I stood there until my hands were steady. Then I went back to the barracks.

Sentiment had nearly compromised the operation. I filed this under things to carry more carefully, and did not repeat the approach.

Back at the barracks, a cigarette paper had been tucked into my locker, the writing microscopic: *Extraction moved forward. Original location compromised. New location: St. Olav's Church basement. 23:00 hours.*

Changed plans were never a good sign. I destroyed the message and lay on my bunk, turning it over. Who had sent it?

Was it legitimate or a trap? How had the original location been compromised? I had no answers and no way to get them before morning.

Sleep did not come.

• • •

Morning brought new intelligence before I had time to look for it. German patrols had intensified overnight, the harbour area in particular. Rumours moved through the workers about a security alert — something had drawn attention.

The site supervisor, a German civilian engineer named Mueller, assembled the work teams with unusual formality.

"Security protocols are elevated as of 0600 hours. All workers remain on site until further notice. No one enters or leaves without special authorisation."

Murmurs through the assembled workers.

"All personnel will be subject to enhanced identification verification. Report to your section leaders for processing."

My pulse quickened. Enhanced verification likely meant fingerprinting, photographs — measures capable of exposing even well-made forgeries. I needed to extract myself and the scientist before that process reached Barracks C.

During the lunch break I spotted the older Bergen worker sitting deliberately alone at the far end of a table. I made my way there, taking a seat not directly beside him but within distance.

"Quite the security today," I said, to no one in particular.

"Someone important must be visiting," another worker replied.

The older man said nothing, but when he finished his bread he left his coffee cup positioned precisely one centimetre over the table's edge. I waited five minutes after he left, then followed.

The workers' latrines were the only place in the compound that offered any privacy, and even there it was unreliable. I found him washing his hands, briefly alone.

"St. Olav's is compromised," he said without turning, his voice barely audible over the running water. "Gestapo raided the cell that used it last night. The message in your locker was not from us."

Cold certainty settled in my stomach. "The scientist?"

"Still secure as far as we know. But the Germans know something is happening — too many patrols, too much activity." He dried his hands with deliberate calm. "Original extraction plan stands, delayed twenty-four hours to let this settle. Can you notify him?"

Twenty-four hours might take us both past the enhanced verification. But attempting an extraction during heightened security carried its own consequences.

"I'll try," I said. "If I can't reach him, I'll proceed with the original plan at the original time."

He nodded slightly. "Good luck, soldier," he whispered, and shuffled out.

Fortune provided my opening that afternoon — Mueller assigned me to deliver construction diagrams to the engineering offices, a separate building where the scientific teams worked. I delivered the diagrams to Dr. Hoffmann, then lingered in the hallway on my return, adjusting my boot laces.

A door opened and the man from the square emerged, in conversation with a German officer. He glanced up, saw me, and in the fraction of a second before his training suppressed it I saw recognition cross his face.

I continued past. When the officer had moved off down the corridor, I knocked three times on the door marked *Dr. Werner Schmidt* and entered without waiting.

He jumped up from his desk.

"Thirty seconds," I said, closing the door behind me. "Original plan stands but delayed twenty-four hours. The church location is a trap. Understood?"

He paled but nodded. "They've been watching me more closely since this morning. Something has them concerned."

"Can you still make the extraction window?"

He hesitated, his eyes moving to a photograph on the desk. A woman and a girl, perhaps ten years old. He watched me understand.

"My wife and daughter," he said quietly. "They promised the family could come when I agreed to cooperate. Now they're the guarantee of my cooperation."

This changed the operation entirely. The extraction plan covered one person, not three.

"Where are they being held?" I asked, my mind already working through what this required.

"Officers' family housing. Building C. External guard only — they're disguised as protected guests, not prisoners."

I made the decision before I had time to doubt it. "Bring only essential documents tomorrow night. Original location. I'll handle the rest."

I slipped out before he could respond and resumed the worker's shuffle down the hallway. The reception clerk barely looked up as I left.

The rest of the shift passed in the particular combination of physical labour and focused planning that had become second nature over the past year. The extraction had evolved from a straightforward operation into something considerably more complex. I needed help.

After the shift I went directly to the bookshop. The closed sign was up at an unusual hour. A small red thread hung from the doorknob.

The bookshop was compromised.

I kept walking, adjusting everything in my head. First the church location, now Frøya. Either German counterintelligence had made significant progress, or there was a traitor somewhere in the Trondheim network.

I made my way to a cobbler's shop in the old town, an emergency backup address I had memorised and hoped not to need. The elderly man at the workbench continued working as I entered.

"We're closing soon," he said.

"I need something resoled before tomorrow. Something that can handle rough terrain."

His hands paused for a moment, then resumed. "Come through."

In the workshop behind the public space, surrounded by leather and glue, I explained the situation. He listened without interruption.

"The woman and child complicate things," he said when I finished. "But not impossibly." He reached for paper and pencil and sketched a rough map. "There's a maintenance tunnel beneath the officers' housing. Access here, exits here. Built for steam pipes, mostly abandoned now."

"Guards?"

"External only. They're complacent — these are officers' families, not prisoners. The real challenge is timing. You'll need to extract the family first, then the scientist, then get everyone to the boat."

"Boat?"

A thin smile. "Did you think you'd walk out of Trondheim? A fishing vessel is waiting in the fjord. Get everyone to this point by 0100 hours and it will take you to a British submarine rendezvous."

Something that had not been present for most of the past two days settled in my chest. A plan.

"I'll need weapons," I said. "And travel papers that hold up through checkpoints."

"Come back at 2100 hours. Everything will be ready." He fixed me with a look that had seen through more people than I would ever meet. "This scientist — his information is worth the risk?"

"According to London, it could save thousands of Allied lives."

"No," the old man said quietly. "Not the only calculation that matters." He returned to his sketch, adding detail. "I fought in the first war. Came home with one lung and nightmares that stayed. Survival itself is sometimes the greatest victory. Easy to forget that when you've seen too much death."

I thought of Kristian. Of Larsen. Of the way I had gradually reduced every situation to tactical equations — risk assessments, operational necessity. Somewhere in the past year the humanity we were supposedly fighting for had become secondary to the fight.

"I'll remember that," I said, and meant it.

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Night brought a thin mist off the sea. I moved through side streets in the uniform of a German maintenance worker, toolbox in hand — wire cutters, a silenced pistol, and the small incendiary device I hoped not to need.

The family housing complex was less fortified than military installations but still monitored. A single guard at the main entrance, two on perimeter patrol at irregular intervals. Building C stood slightly apart from the others.

I approached from the service alley, found the maintenance tunnel entrance exactly where the sketch indicated. The grate had been recently disturbed — Hammer's people had prepared the way.

The tunnel was low and damp, partially flooded in sections. After fifty metres I reached a vertical shaft with metal rungs leading up into Building C. A small utility room, pipes, electrical boxes. I checked my watch — 23:15. On schedule.

I adjusted my cap and stepped into the hallway with the toolbox. The third floor was quiet. A guard stood outside apartment 3C, bored but present. He straightened as I approached.

"Maintenance," I said in German, before he could speak. "Heating malfunction. Frau Schmidt reported it earlier."

He frowned. "I received no notification."

I shrugged — the universal gesture of a worker caught between management and procedure. "Take it up with the housing officer. I go where they send me."

He hesitated, then stepped aside. "Make it quick."

I knocked. A woman's voice answered.

"Maintenance, Frau Schmidt. For the heating."

The door opened. A woman in her early forties — dark-haired, the particular look of someone who has been worried for a long time and has learned to wear it quietly. Behind her, a girl of perhaps ten sat at a small table with a book.

"My husband didn't mention any maintenance," the woman said carefully.

I stepped inside and closed the door. “Your husband sent me,” I said in Russian, and watched the recognition come.

She composed herself immediately, responding in German for anyone listening. “The radiator is in the bedroom. Please follow me.”

In the bedroom she switched to Russian. “You’re with the resistance?”

“Yes. We’re extracting you tonight — you and your daughter, along with your husband. Is there anything essential you need? We travel light.”

She glanced at a small valise by the bed. “I’ve been ready for three days.” Her eyes hardened. “They told us we were honoured guests when they brought us from Russia. We understood within a week.”

“The guard — is he consistent?”

“He rotates every four hours. Cigarette break at the end of the hallway around midnight. Two minutes, never longer.”

She had been conducting her own form of resistance — observing, cataloguing, preparing. I introduced myself and she gave me her name: Irina.

“Your daughter,” I said. “Is she prepared for what might be frightening?”

“Natasha has lived under fear for two years. She understands more than you might think.” She called softly to the girl, who appeared in the doorway. In careful, simple Russian, Irina explained that they would be leaving with this man who was a friend.

The girl studied me with eyes that had seen too much. “Will Papa come too?” she asked in Norwegian — children acquire languages with a speed that puts adults to shame.

“Yes,” I said. “We’ll meet him very soon.”

I spent the next fifteen minutes making actual noise with the radiator and explaining the plan. At midnight, the guard’s footsteps retreated down the hallway.

“Now,” I said.

We moved quickly and quietly — Irina with the valise, Natasha with a stuffed bear, me in front. The shaft was the hardest part for the child, but she went down the rungs without a sound, her mother close behind. Through the tunnel to a different exit, emerging in a service yard two blocks from the complex. Hammer was waiting with a delivery van.

“Quickly,” he said, helping them inside.

“The scientist?” I asked as I climbed in.

“My people are moving into position now. Warehouse extraction proceeds as planned.” He handed me a small radio. “Frequency three. One click for success, two for complications, three for abort.”

The van threaded through Trondheim’s darkened streets, avoiding the main roads. I checked my watch — 23:40. Twenty minutes to the warehouse rendezvous.

“Will they hurt my father if they catch him?” Natasha asked suddenly, her voice small in the darkness.

The question cut through everything operational and arrived at the plain truth of what was at stake.

"We won't let them catch him," I said. It was the only honest answer available.

Hammer dropped us at an abandoned fish processing plant near the original meeting point. I established a defensive position with sightlines to all approaches. Irina kept Natasha occupied with quiet word games, and I found myself watching them — this woman maintaining calm for her child in the back of an abandoned building in an occupied city at midnight — and thinking of Hammer's words about what actually mattered.

At midnight, a single click on the radio. Success. The scientist had been extracted.

Ten minutes later: click-click. Complications.

I keyed acknowledgment and request for information. The reply came in Morse: *PURSUIT 2 VEHICLES DIVERSION CREATED PROCEED TO SECONDARY.*

The Germans had discovered the extraction. I explained the situation to Irina in a few words. "Be ready to move the moment they arrive."

The minutes passed. At 00:27, headlights swept the road outside and cut. Footsteps — more than one person. I raised the pistol and covered the entrance.

"Fishing is better at dawn," came the voice.

"Unless you seek eels," I answered, and lowered the weapon.

Two men entered supporting a third between them. Irina rushed forward and her husband collapsed into her arms, blood darkening his side.

"Checkpoint shooting," said one of the escorts — the older worker from the construction site, confirming his allegiance in the most unambiguous way available. "He'll live, but we need to move. Roadblocks across the city."

The scientist embraced his daughter with his good arm while I examined the wound. Clean through, painful, bleeding freely but not into anything vital. I applied a pressure bandage from my kit.

"The documents?" I asked.

He patted his breast pocket. "All here."

At 00:42, Hammer returned. "German patrols converging from multiple directions. The boat is waiting but the original route is compromised."

"Alternatives?"

"Old smugglers' tunnel from prohibition days. Runs from this building to the water. Narrow, but it holds."

He led us to the cellar, pushed aside fish barrels, revealed a trapdoor. The tunnel beyond was even narrower than the maintenance passage — barely wide enough upright, the walls glistening with damp, the air thick with disuse.

"I'll go first," I said. "Then the girl, her mother, the scientist, then the two of you covering the rear."

We moved as quickly as the wound and the cramped conditions allowed. Water dripped from the ceiling. Twice we cleared debris that had fallen from the walls. Above us, muffled but distinct, came the sounds of vehicles and shouting — the Germans searching the fish plant we had just left.

"How much further?" Irina asked.

"Not far," Hammer said, with enough uncertainty in his voice that I was glad she could not see his face.

The tunnel sloped upward. Salt water on the air. Then a rusted iron door, which resisted until I put my shoulder into it and it gave way with a groan that seemed to fill the world.

Beyond: a small rocky cove, the moon filtered through mist, and a fishing boat sitting dark and engine-silent at the water's edge.

I held everyone back and surveyed the cove before allowing movement. Deserted, as far as I could tell. I signalled the boat with three flashes and received three in return.

"Go. Quickly but quietly."

Natasha went first across the slippery rocks, steadier than she had any right to be. Her mother helped the scientist. The distance to the boat was perhaps thirty metres of exposed shoreline.

We had covered half of it when a searchlight blazed from the headland to our right and swept across the water.

"Down."

We pressed behind a cluster of rocks. The light passed over us, continued its arc, then swung back — slower, more deliberate. Searching.

"Next pass they'll have us," Hammer whispered.

The scientist's face was pale with pain and fear, but his eyes were clear. "Get my family to the boat," he said. "The documents are what matter. I'll create a distraction."

"No one gets left behind," I said. "Hammer, get them to the boat. I'll handle it."

I was already moving before he could argue — not toward the searchlight but parallel to the shore, keeping low among the rocks. The incendiary device from the toolbox was in my hand. I found a suitable spot, set the timer for thirty seconds, and pulled back.

The explosion was not large. In the quiet night, it did not need to be. The searchlight swung immediately toward the flames and voices shouted as the German position responded.

I ran back. "Now. Straight to the boat."

We moved as a group, no longer concerned with stealth. The scientist stumbled once; Hammer and I had him between us. Behind us, confused gunfire erupted at shadows near the burning device.

The crew pulled us aboard, the engine turning over quietly as the last of us cleared the gunwale. The boat slipped away from shore with minimal lights, navigating into the deeper water of the fjord.

Only when the shoreline had become a smudge in the mist did I let my shoulders down. The scientist sat wrapped in blankets, Irina working on his wound with the boat's first aid kit. Natasha had fallen asleep against his uninjured side, still holding the stuffed bear.

"Thank you," Irina said, looking up.

I nodded. I did not feel that thanks was particularly mine to accept. I had done what the situation required. So had everyone else.

The boat's captain — who introduced himself only as Fisherman — confirmed the rendezvous. "British submarine in ninety minutes. Further out in the fjord. Transfer will need to be quick — they can only surface briefly."

The scientist looked at me across the boat. "It will help end this," he said. "Was it worth the risk?"

I thought of Kristian. Of Larsen. Of every person who had made their own calculation and paid their own price since April of 1940.

"Yes," I said.

Hammer settled beside me and offered coffee from a thermos. "What now, Solberg? Come back to Trondheim with me, or go with them to Britain?"

I had not considered it. My orders had never specified what came after the extraction.

"London would debrief you personally," the scientist said. "Your knowledge of German installations would be valuable to Allied planning."

The opportunity was real. But so was the pull back toward Haugen, Dahl, Ingrid, the cell still operating in the north. They were still out there, still making their daily calculations.

"The harbour photographs can go with them?" I asked Hammer.

"Better processed in Britain than anything we can manage here."

I handed over the camera, and with it the question resolved itself.

"My war is here," I said. "Until Norway is free."

Hammer's face creased into a smile. "Somehow I knew you'd say that."

The submarine rendezvous occurred precisely as planned — a dark shape surfacing briefly in the deep fjord, crew appearing on deck to receive the cargo, human and documentary.

The scientist gripped my hand before being helped across. "When this is over, and your country is free again — look for us. We would be honoured to call such a man a friend."

Natasha surprised me with a quick fierce hug. "*Takk,*" she whispered, in Norwegian that had arrived in her faster than any of this should have.

Within minutes they were aboard and the submarine was descending again into the protective dark. The fishing boat turned back toward shore on a circuitous route, avoiding the patrols now searching frantically for an escaped scientist they would not find.

As Trondheim's distant outline came back into view, I thought of my parents. Their house on Fjordgata, the light in the kitchen window, my mother's silhouette moving past the glass. Perhaps someday I would knock on that blue door again. Perhaps they would open it and find that the years had returned something to them after all.

But not today. Today I returned to the shadow war that had become my existence since the last Allied ships had disappeared over Narvik's horizon.

The boat rounded a rocky headland, revealing a small beach where a truck waited in the grey predawn light.

My next mission. My continuing war.

Behind us, the rising sun was beginning its work on the fjord — gold light on dark water, the mountains holding their shapes against the sky exactly as they always had and would long after all of this was over.

CHAPTER 8

Personal Cost

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Winter fell upon Norway like a shroud, blanketing the landscape in snow that glittered beneath the weak Arctic sun. Nearly eight months had passed since the Trondheim extraction — eight months of constant movement, of operations that had begun to blur together into a single sustained effort of sabotage, intelligence gathering, and survival.

Our resistance cell had evolved from the ragged group that emerged from Narvik's collapse into something more structured and more effective — and consequently, more hunted. We had become harder and quieter and more capable over eight months, which was the progress of a war that was

going badly for Norway in every conventional sense and well in every unconventional one.

Haugen had been captured during an operation in October. The details had come to us in pieces — a safe house compromised, a checkpoint that had somehow been expecting him, the particular pattern of subsequent German behaviour suggesting a source had been turned. His fate remained unknown, though we all carried the same grim suspicion. We did not speak of it directly. We spoke around it in the way you speak around things that are probably true and that saying aloud will not improve.

Dahl had taken command. It suited him — he had been the steadying weight in the cell since Narvik and the change in title changed nothing about his function. His weathered face had grown more lined with each week of it, the responsibility visible in him in the way Haugen's had never quite been, perhaps because Haugen had carried his responsibility behind a more controlled surface.

This night found us sheltering in an abandoned hunting lodge deep in the mountains west of Bodø. Six of us around a small stove whose warmth barely reached the walls. Dahl spread a map across the makeshift table — a door balanced on ammunition crates.

"British intelligence confirms the convoy will pass through Vestfjorden tomorrow night," he said, tracing the shipping route. "Fifteen vessels, heavily escorted. Carrying reinforcements and equipment for the northern garrisons."

Ingrid, our primary liaison with Allied intelligence networks, studied the markings. "RAF reconnaissance

photographed four destroyers and numerous smaller escort vessels. They're taking no chances after the losses last month."

The losses she referred to had been our most significant success to date — three supply ships sunk by Norwegian resistance-guided British torpedo bombers. The Germans had tightened security considerably in response.

"Objective?" asked Nielsen, a former naval officer who had joined our cell in the summer.

"Information, not destruction," Dahl replied. "The British want to know exactly what they're moving north. Troop numbers, equipment types, especially any specialised winter gear or ski units."

"They're planning something," Ingrid said. "London has increased requests for coastal intelligence tenfold in recent months."

My attention drifted briefly to the lodge's single window, where frost had formed intricate patterns across the glass. Beyond, the mountains were still and white under the stars. I had learned these ridgelines well enough that I sometimes saw them when I closed my eyes.

"Solberg." Dahl's voice pulled me back. "You'll lead the observation team. You know Vestfjorden better than most."

Since returning from Trondheim, my role had shifted gradually toward intelligence operations. My English and growing familiarity with coded communications made me more useful in Allied-coordinated missions than in direct action.

"We'll need the boat," I said, thinking through the logistics. "And access to the sea cabin on Mosken for the radio equipment."

"Already arranged," Ingrid confirmed. "Jensen handles the radio at Mosken while you and Eriksen observe from Værøy."

The plan took shape in the familiar, efficient way of people who had done this enough times that operational planning had become a shared language — positions, recognition signals, fallback protocols, contingencies. The routine of it was its own comfort.

Later, when the others had settled into their sleeping bags, I took first watch by the window with the Krag-Jørgensen across my knees. The rifle had been with me since Narvik. Its stock bore the scars and marks of over a year of resistance, and I knew its weight the way I knew the weight of my own hands.

Ingrid joined me, pulling a blanket around her shoulders. The months had changed her face — sharper angles, watchful eyes, a baseline tension that never fully dissolved even in secure locations. There was something else in it too, something that had not been there in the early weeks: a settled quality, a person who had located herself in the situation and no longer spent energy on the locating.

"You're thinking about Trondheim again," she said quietly.

"How did you know?"

A small smile. "You get a certain look. Distant. Like you're seeing through the mountains."

She was not wrong. Thoughts of my parents had grown more frequent as winter deepened. Whether they were warm

enough, whether the food shortages had reached them, whether my father's leg still bothered him in the cold — these questions occupied whatever space the mission didn't fill.

"I received word through our networks," she continued. "Your parents are managing. Your father has permission to fish again, under German supervision. It helps with their rations."

The weight that lifted from my chest was physical enough to notice. My father on the water, which was where he had always belonged, even if now it required German papers and a German shadow watching from the dock. At least he was on the water. At least he was himself in the place that made him himself.

"Thank you," I said, knowing she understood what the words contained.

We sat in silence for a time, the soft breathing of sleeping resistance fighters and the occasional crack from the stove the only sounds. Outside, the mountains held their shape against the stars. I had been looking at these ridgelines for long enough that I sometimes saw them when I closed my eyes — the specific contour of the one above us, the dip before the false summit, the way it caught the light differently in morning than in evening.

"Do you ever think about what comes after?" I asked eventually. "When this ends. If it ends."

She was quiet for a moment. The question was not one that got asked directly very often — there was a superstition around it, the feeling that naming the future too clearly might be a kind of presumption. But we were alone in the watch, the others

asleep, and the cold and the dark of the lodge made a particular kind of honesty easier.

"Sometimes," she said. "Though planning for a future we might not see feels almost dangerous. Like you're spending something you haven't been given yet." She pulled the blanket tighter. "I think I'd like to study. University. History, perhaps — understanding how we arrived here seems important. Not just Norway. All of it. How ordinary people become what we've become, in either direction."

I could picture it. Ingrid in a lecture hall rather than a frozen mountain observation post, her mind turned toward academic problems instead of survival ones. The thought had a particular quality — not wistfulness exactly, something more grounded. A version of her that was possible rather than imaginary.

"And you?" she asked. "The fisherman's son from Narvik — what does he want when Norway is free?"

The question caught me more off guard than I expected. I had been so thoroughly inside the work for so long that a life on the other side of it had become genuinely difficult to picture. Not because I had stopped believing in it, but because the constant present tense of resistance left almost no room for the future tense.

"Before all this, I planned to teach. Languages." I looked out at the frozen darkness. "English, primarily. Maybe Norwegian literature. I wanted to work with the words that connected things." A pause. "Now I'm not certain I remember how to live in a world that isn't trying to kill me at irregular intervals."

"You'll remember," she said. "It's not a skill, it's just a setting. You return to it."

"How do you know?"

"I don't. But I think the things we were before the war are still in us somewhere. Not unchanged — the war has changed everything. But not gone." She was quiet for a moment, looking at the window. "I remember who I was before April of 1940. The person who argued with her professors about historical methodology and spent weekends in the library and thought that being decisive meant choosing a research focus." She paused. "That person would not recognise me. But she's still in there. I can feel her sometimes. Surprised at what she turned into."

"Does that frighten you?"

"Less than it used to." She turned to look at me directly — her face in the lamplight that came through from the other room, the quality of attention she gave things she was being honest about. "What frightens me now is different. Not what I've become. More — whether the becoming was worth what it cost."

I understood what she meant. The accounting. The people who had not made it to this watch by this window. Kristian. Larsen. Haugen, whose fate we still did not know. The specific weight of all the choices that had brought us here.

"I think it was," I said. "I think it is."

Her hand found mine in the dark — not the brief firm pressure of someone offering comfort, but something slower. A different kind of acknowledgement.

"Then we'll see it through," she said. "And after — whatever after looks like — we'll figure that out then."

The moment held something I did not have a clean word for. Not quite hope — hope felt like too optimistic a thing for a resistance fighter in a frozen mountain lodge who had lost count of how many people she had known who were now gone. But adjacent to it. The sense that we still contained the possibility of future selves, and that those selves were not entirely unconnected to who we were right now.

She seemed to understand, without my having said it, that this was enough. That the moment did not require anything more from it than what it was.

"Get some sleep before tomorrow. I'll take the watch."

"My shift isn't over."

"Consider it an order from your intelligence officer," she said, the hint of a smile in it. "The mission needs you alert."

She was right. I relinquished my position and settled into my sleeping bag. The last thing I saw before closing my eyes was her silhouette against the window — still and watchful in the dark, the mountains visible behind her through the frosted glass.

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Morning brought heavy snowfall that continued through the day, hampering movement but providing cover as we worked our way down from the mountains toward the coast. We travelled on skis along forest paths known to few outside

the resistance — routes that had served hunters and smugglers long before they served people like us.

Eight hours. By late afternoon we reached the small sheltered cove where Jensen waited with the boat, a sturdy fishing vessel made to look neglected by careful attention to exactly that effect.

"Weather report from Bodø," Jensen said as we loaded our equipment. "Storm front moving in from the north. Seas will be rough by nightfall."

Dahl assessed the darkening sky. "Bad for observation. Good for concealment."

"The convoy won't delay," Ingrid said. "Their schedule is fixed by a rendezvous with vessels coming from Trondheim. They'll sail regardless."

No further discussion needed. Eriksen and I would proceed with the observation while Jensen established the radio position on Mosken. The others would return to the mountains, maintaining our security through dispersal.

Dahl pulled me aside as we prepared to leave. "Intelligence only," he said, his voice low. "No engagement. The British need information more than dead Germans right now."

I checked the waterproof case — binoculars, a night scope from a recent British drop, a low-light camera. "Understood."

Ingrid approached and handed me a small oilcloth package. "Extra rations. And a new recognition codebook from London. Memorise and destroy before you reach open water."

Our eyes met briefly — the unspoken acknowledgment that accompanied every parting in this life. Each one might be the last.

"Two days," I said. "Three at most."

"We'll monitor the emergency frequency." She paused. "Use it only if —"

"I know," I said, managing a small smile. "Only if absolutely necessary."

The boat pulled away from shore as the last light left the winter sky. Eriksen and I studied charts of Vestfjorden in the small cabin by a shielded lamp, the sound of the sea rising around us.

"The convoy will use the deeper channels here," Eriksen said, tracing the route. "They'll be silhouetted against the snow on Værøy's eastern slopes if we position correctly."

"Assuming visibility permits," I said, listening to the wind climbing outside.

The journey to Værøy took three hours, the small vessel fighting increasingly violent seas. Waves broke over the bow and froze nearly on contact. Ice formed along the railings and deck, making movement careful work.

Jensen dropped us at a rocky inlet on Værøy's southern coast shortly before midnight, engine muffled against the dark. "I'll make for Mosken now. Radio check at 0200."

The boat disappeared into the darkness and we turned to face the slope above us. Værøy rose steep and snow-covered,

minimal cover but an unobstructed view of the sea lanes below — assuming the weather cleared.

We established an observation post in a small natural depression halfway up the eastern face, using snow and ice to build a windbreak. The temperature was well below freezing, the wind chill pushing it toward lethal. Our specialised arctic gear was adequate, but only while we stayed active.

"Movement protocol every thirty minutes," I told Eriksen. "No exceptions."

He nodded. Hypothermia was as reliable a killer as any German patrol.

The hours passed with agonising slowness. The storm intensified, then gradually began to relent. By 0300, patches of clear sky appeared between racing clouds and the stars emerged in the northern dark.

Jensen's radio contact confirmed it: the convoy had left Bodø on schedule, passing our position within two hours. Allied intelligence suggested it carried significant reinforcements — possibly an entire specialised mountain warfare unit.

"Movement," Eriksen whispered.

Through my binoculars, running lights in the northern entrance to Vestfjorden — carefully dimmed but visible in the improved conditions. The lead vessel, precisely on schedule.

"Begin sequence," I said, setting up the camera while Eriksen prepared the observation log.

Over the following hour we documented each vessel as it passed below — three large troop transports, six supply ships, two tankers, four destroyers, six smaller patrol craft. More significant than the numbers was what we could see on the decks: troops out in the cold, not sheltering below, which meant prepared for rapid deployment.

"Those aren't regular infantry," Eriksen said, passing me the night scope. "Look at the equipment. Ski racks. Winter warfare gear."

He was right. This was not a routine rotation of occupation forces. This was a specialised deployment.

"London needs this immediately," I said, making rapid notes for Jensen to encode. "The numbers, the equipment, and especially the winter warfare aspect."

As the last vessel cleared our observation point, we began our descent toward the rendezvous location where Jensen would collect us at dawn. The storm had fully abated, leaving a crystalline clarity to the air and ice on every surface.

We had covered roughly half the distance when Eriksen raised his hand.

I dropped immediately, scanning the slopes.

Four German soldiers below us, moving upward, following our earlier tracks in the snow.

"Spotted something from a patrol boat," Eriksen whispered. "Or checking the island as a precaution."

Either way our position was compromised. The open slope, the clear weather that had made our observation possible — both now worked against us.

"Options?" Eriksen asked.

I assessed it quickly. Evade — difficult given the tracks we had already left. Engage — a firefight neither of us would survive against four soldiers with probable radio contact to the convoy. Separate — increase the odds that at least one of us and the intelligence reached Jensen.

"Take the camera and the observation logs," I said. "Circle around to the western ridge, then down to the rendezvous. I'll draw them away."

He looked as though he might argue, then nodded. "Good luck."

"If you have to choose between coming back for me and getting the intelligence to London," I said, "get it to London."

I moved laterally across the slope before he could respond, leaving visible tracks deliberately. When I had enough distance between us, I turned downhill on a line that would intercept the patrol and lead them away from Eriksen's planned route.

The pale light of approaching dawn illuminated the slope. I positioned behind a rock outcropping and when the patrol came within range I fired twice — not to hit but to draw. They took cover immediately, returning fire, and I retreated uphill from position to position, firing occasionally to keep their attention.

The tactic worked. All four soldiers came after me, spreading out to prevent escape — two advancing while two

covered, alternating in the professional rhythm of men who had done this before. They were gaining ground.

A bullet chipped rock inches from my face. I rolled to new cover and the snow gave way beneath me, sending me sliding several metres into a shallow depression that briefly took me out of their line of sight.

I found my bearings. A narrow ravine cut across the slope, running back in the direction of the rendezvous. If I could use it to lose the patrol, I might still make the extraction.

I moved quickly through the ravine, listening to the Germans calling to each other as they tried to reestablish my position. The delay put distance between us.

The ravine widened onto a small plateau overlooking the southern coast. Below, the inlet where Jensen's boat should appear within the hour. No sign of Eriksen, which I took as a good sign — a concealed route.

Then, an engine from the water side. A German patrol boat approaching the island, presumably summoned by the firing. Even if I lost the land patrol, that boat would cut off the extraction.

I needed to warn Jensen before he came in. The emergency transmitter in my pack would reach Mosken, but using it would let the Germans triangulate my position.

In practice, it was not a decision.

I activated the transmitter and kept the message brief and coded: *Nest disturbed. Eggs in flight. Farmer approaching south field. Delay harvest.*

Jensen would understand — the observation post was blown, Eriksen was attempting extraction with the intelligence, a German naval presence was threatening the rendezvous, and he should hold off until conditions changed.

I destroyed the transmitter the moment the message was sent and resumed moving. The patrol changed direction within minutes, converging with renewed urgency. I led them uphill toward the island's central ridge, away from the southern coast, buying whatever window I could for Eriksen.

A bullet grazed my left arm. The pain was sudden and sharp enough that I nearly lost my footing on the ice. I returned fire more deliberately now, forcing cover, slowing their advance — but spending ammunition I could not replace.

Each minute I held them gained Eriksen a better chance. Each minute also cost me ammunition and warmth and blood.

From my elevated position I caught a movement near the inlet — a figure moving toward the shore. Eriksen. He had made the rendezvous.

Almost simultaneously, Jensen's boat appeared from the west, hugging the island's contours to stay away from the German patrol vessel circling the eastern shore. Two minutes, perhaps three, before that boat rounded the southern point.

I made my decision.

The calculation was not complicated. Eriksen had the intelligence — the convoy data, the photographs, the observation logs that would tell London exactly what was being moved north and why it mattered. That information represented weeks of operations, several lives, and whatever

the British were planning in the north that these reinforcements were meant to prevent. Against that, one man with three rounds remaining and a wounded arm in deteriorating weather.

The decision was not complicated. It was simply not a good one to be required to make.

I moved to the highest visible point on the ridge, fully exposed, and fired three shots into the air.

The patrol turned everything on me. Bullets came close enough that I felt the air move. I went behind an inadequate cluster of rocks and stayed there, watching through the gap between them.

Eriksen sprinted the final distance to the shore. Jensen brought the boat into the inlet, hugging the coast, moving with the practised economy of a man who had done this in worse conditions. The German patrol boat was still out of sight around the eastern headland.

Eriksen went aboard. Jensen reversed immediately, the boat disappearing around the western edge of the island.

The intelligence was safe. The mission had succeeded.

I held behind the rocks and breathed and waited for the feeling that was supposed to come with that — satisfaction, relief, the clean completion of something that had worked. It did not come immediately. What came instead was a very clear-headed assessment of my current position: four German soldiers, three rounds, a wound that was taking more than it had been an hour ago, and a temperature that was going to make the choice between the Germans finding me and the cold

finding me something that would resolve itself without my input if I stayed still too long.

I thought of Kristian in the snow at the eastern approach. The way his hand had still been strong at the end, which had felt like a lie his body was telling and could not keep telling. I had stayed with him. Johansen had covered.

Nobody was covering now.

The patrol had split — two coming uphill toward me, two cutting across to block the western slope. Disciplined. They were not going to give up simply because I had stopped firing.

I checked what remained — three rounds in the Krag-Jørgensen, one in the sidearm. Not enough to hold off four soldiers. Possibly enough for what might become necessary, which was a thought I had, and noted, and set aside to deal with later on the basis that later had not arrived yet.

Then: the unmistakable sound of aircraft engines from the north.

Three RAF Bristol Beaufighters, flying dangerously low over the water. Their target was the convoy, now several kilometres distant but still visible in the clear morning light. The patrol boat that had been circling the island abandoned its search and raced toward the convoy in a futile gesture of support.

The land patrol paused. Several looked back toward the sea where anti-aircraft fire was now climbing the pale sky.

I went.

Down a narrow gully on the northern face, away from both the patrol and the extraction point. The route was difficult and it took me far from any planned rendezvous, but with Jensen and Eriksen clear, survival was the only remaining objective.

By midday I had reached Værøy's northern shore — sheer cliffs down to a narrow rocky beach. No Germans. For now.

The wound was doing more than it had been. Blood loss and the cold had begun to take cumulative effect, and the temperature was dropping again as another front approached from the north. Without shelter, the choice between the Germans finding me and the cold finding me would not remain open for long.

I scouted along the shoreline until I found a fissure in the cliff face — not a cave but a crevice with enough depth to cut the wind and break my outline from a distance. Using what I had left, I gathered seaweed and driftwood to make a crude barrier across the opening and crawled inside.

I cleaned the wound with snow and bound it with strips torn from my undershirt. A single emergency ration bar remained in my kit, enough for a day if I was careful about it. The canteen was half-full, the water already turning to slush.

Jensen would report to Dahl that I had been left behind. Standard protocols were clear — no immediate rescue attempt that might expose additional fighters. I was alone until conditions permitted a recovery operation, possibly days given the German presence now alerted to resistance activity on the island.

Darkness fell again. I forced myself to eat a quarter of the ration bar, take small sips of water, and move at intervals to

stay ahead of the cold. German patrols drifted down from the slopes occasionally, but they seemed concentrated on the southern portions of the island where they had first encountered us.

I thought of Kristian in the long hours of that night. What he would make of my current position — probably find some grim humour in it. I thought of Larsen, who had made his own calculation and paid his own price without complaint. Of all the people who had reached the point I was approaching now and not come back from it.

The night seemed endless. Eventually, barely, it began to lighten.

With the grey of dawn came a new sound — boat engines, with a rhythm different from the higher pitch of the German patrol craft.

I moved the seaweed barrier carefully and looked out. A fishing boat approaching the shore below my position, moving deliberately through the chop. As it came closer I recognised the profile — Larsen's old vessel, now operated by his nephew after the old man's death.

A signal from the boat: three short, two long. Our emergency extraction code.

Someone had come back.

I held for a moment, running the possibilities. Then I responded with the recognition signal, using my small emergency mirror to reflect the growing daylight in the required pattern. The boat adjusted course immediately toward a naturally sheltered spot near my position.

Getting down to the shore was harder than it had any right to be. The wound and the night's exposure had taken more than I had realised, and each step down the cliff face required a separate decision. When I reached the water's edge, a figure had already dropped from the boat into a small dinghy and was rowing toward me.

It was Ingrid.

"You look terrible," were her first words as the dinghy grounded on the rocks. No recriminations for the risk, no emotional display — just the practical assessment of a resistance fighter taking inventory of a comrade's condition.

"Missed you too," I said, and waded into the freezing water to help pull the dinghy up.

"Can you make the boat?"

"I'll manage."

She handed me a flask. Not water — aquavit, which burned a path down into my chest and spread an artificial warmth I was in no position to decline.

"Eriksen made it with the intelligence," she said as we pushed the dinghy back into deeper water. "Jensen radioed your situation. Dahl said to wait, but —" A shrug that covered everything it needed to cover.

"The Germans?"

"Still on the southern slopes. Reinforcements from Bodø overnight. They know something significant happened here." She helped me into the dinghy and took up the oars herself, pulling with the powerful, practised strokes of someone raised

near the water. “We have roughly twenty minutes before the patrol boat returns to this sector.”

On the deck of Larsen’s boat, Nielsen and a young woman I did not recognise helped me aboard. Ingrid came over the side behind me with the ease of someone who had never needed assistance with such things.

“Get him below,” she said. “Wound needs cleaning and he’s close to hypothermic.”

In the small cabin, the young woman — Kari, a nurse from Bodø who had joined after the Germans requisitioned her hospital — examined my arm with professional efficiency.

“You’re lucky,” she said, working. “The cold probably prevented infection, and the bullet only grazed the muscle. Full use in a week, perhaps less.”

Above, the engine note changed as the boat moved away from Værøy, Nielsen taking a course through the smaller islands where German naval patrols were less frequent.

Kari bandaged the arm with the neat, economical motions of a person who had been doing this under difficult conditions for some time. When she had finished she said “warm fluids, sleep, no unnecessary movement,” which was the entirety of the prescription available in a fishing boat cabin, and went back above deck.

Ingrid appeared a few minutes later with fish broth, steaming and simple. She sat beside me on the narrow bunk without asking whether I wanted company, which I took as a correct assessment.

“Drink. Slowly.”

I drank. The warmth came back to my hands and feet in the painful way warmth always returns after real cold — the pins-and-needles sensation that means the body is reclaiming its extremities and that you are going to live, which is both good news and uncomfortable news delivered simultaneously.

For a while neither of us spoke. The boat worked through the water with the rhythm of a vessel that knew its business, and the engine noise filled the cabin in a way that was both muffling and oddly companionable.

"Dahl said to wait," I said.

"Dahl is the cell commander and he was right to say it." She looked at me steadily. "I didn't wait."

"Why?"

She considered the question as though it deserved an honest answer rather than a quick one. "Because the protocol is sensible and I understand why it exists. And because you would have come back for any of us, and I have been watching you do the right thing for so long that it seemed like my turn."

I did not know what to do with that, so I said: "Thank you."

"Also Larsen's nephew knows this coastline better than anyone living, and Jensen had the boat fuelled and ready, and the intelligence was already clear, and the window was there." She paused. "I'm not going to pretend it was reckless. It was calculated."

"I know you don't do anything that isn't calculated."

"I don't do many things that aren't calculated," she said, which was a slightly different sentence, and she said it without looking at me.

The boat pitched as it met a larger wave. Somewhere above us Nielsen adjusted course without comment.

"I thought about Kristian," I said, after a while. "In the crevice. The long hours. I thought about Larsen too. About what it feels like to make the final calculation."

She was quiet. She was not a person who filled silence with noise when the silence was doing something necessary.

"I wasn't certain I was going to be found," I said. "The standard protocol is clear. I told Eriksen to take the intelligence to London and not look back, and I meant it. And then I had a night in a crevice in the cliff face to think about what it meant." I looked at the broth in my hands. "I found I wasn't afraid, exactly. I was — I'm not sure what I was. Resigned isn't the right word. More like accepting. Like the calculation had already resolved itself and I was just waiting to see which way."

"And now?"

"Now I'm in a boat cabin drinking broth and you're sitting beside me and the intelligence is on its way to London." I looked up at her. "It feels like something I'm not sure I deserve."

"That's depletion talking," she said. "You'll think more clearly tomorrow."

"Maybe. But I've been thinking about Kristian for a long time, and Larsen, and all of them — the ones who made the same calculation in harder circumstances and didn't have a

boat appear. And I keep thinking about what we owe them. Whether we pay the debt by surviving or by continuing, or whether those are the same thing."

She was quiet for a moment. "I think the debt is paid by not letting what they died for come to nothing," she said finally. "Which means surviving, when you can. Which means you did the right thing up there — giving Eriksen the chance to get clear. And it means I did the right thing coming back for you." She paused. "Both things can be right. They don't cancel each other."

The straightforward precision of this — that was Ingrid. Not consolation for its own sake. The actual argument, worked through, offered without sentiment.

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm still the same person who stood outside Narvik watching the British ships disappear," I said.

"You're not," she said. "None of us are. We had to change to survive this." She took the empty mug from my hands. "But the reason you're still fighting — the thing you're protecting rather than just opposing. That's the same, isn't it?"

I thought about it honestly. "Yes. Norway. The people in it. What it could become when this is over." I paused. "And the specific people in this boat."

She smiled — a real one, the face briefly of a person who existed before all of this, who had argued with her professors about historical methodology and spent weekends in a library and had no idea what was coming. "That's why you're still Erik Solberg," she said. "Despite considerable evidence to the contrary."

The boat pitched again in heavier seas. She steadied herself against the bulkhead, the professional resistance fighter fully back in her bearing.

"Rest. Six hours to safe harbour. The intelligence is already en route to London via Sweden." She started to rise.

I caught her hand. "Ingrid." A pause. "I'm glad it was you who came."

Her fingers tightened around mine. Not briefly — for a moment, a real one, before she released.

"So am I," she said, and went above.

In the hours that followed, drifting between sleep and wakefulness as Larsen's boat worked through the winter water, I found my thoughts returning not to the operation itself but to the people around me — the community that had formed around shared purpose and was held together by something that had ceased to be purely functional a long time ago.

We fought against the occupation. We also fought for each other. The two had become, over a year and more, completely inseparable.

The last man in Narvik was no longer alone.

CHAPTER 9

Turning Point

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Spring came to Norway like a rumour — tentative, easily disbelieved. Snow retreated from the lower slopes and the days stretched longer with the stubborn insistence of northern light. It had been nearly a year since the Germans marched into Narvik, and the occupation had settled into a grinding, bureaucratic permanence that was almost worse than the chaos of invasion.

We had moved our main cell further south over the winter, establishing a more permanent base in the Saltfjellet mountains. The group had changed shape since Dahl took command — smaller, more deliberately composed. Several fighters had been lost to capture or the cold. Others had filtered

away to reunite with family or pursue local resistance work in occupied villages. What remained was leaner, harder, and considerably more effective than the ragged band that had fled into the eastern forest after Narvik's fall.

I was splitting firewood behind the farmhouse we used as our winter shelter when Dahl appeared in the doorway.

"Letter from London," he said — which was how we referred to radio messages that came through the Swedish channels. He handed me a folded slip of paper, the decoded text in Eriksen's neat hand.

I read it twice.

The message was from a British SOE handler I knew only by the codename "Shepherd." It outlined, in the carefully compressed language of resistance communication, an operation called Anchor — a coordinated series of sabotage strikes targeting the northern railway supply lines, timed to coincide with what the message obliquely referred to as "expanded Allied activity in the south." No specifics on what that meant, though Dahl, who had fought in the previous war, allowed himself a rare expression of quiet excitement when I showed it to him.

"They're building toward something," he said.

"They're always building toward something," I replied, though I felt it too — a shift in the quality of the intelligence we had been receiving, the increasing frequency of supply drops, the sense that the resistance networks across Norway were being activated rather than merely maintained. Something was coming. We could not see it clearly yet but we could feel its

approach the way you feel weather before it arrives, a change in the quality of the air.

"There's more," Dahl said. "Read the second paragraph."

The second paragraph was addressed to me by name. Shepherd wanted me to travel to Oslo.

I set the paper down on the chopping block.

Oslo was the heart of the occupation — Terboven's seat of power, crawling with Gestapo and Norwegian collaborators eager to demonstrate their loyalty. Every resistance fighter in the country treated it with the same wariness a sensible person applies to a lit fuse.

"The contact is a former professor at the university," Dahl said, reading from the paper. "Name of Aas. He's been running a courier network out of Oslo for over a year — apparently one of the most significant domestic intelligence operations we have. Shepherd says it's in danger of collapse. Their courier chain was compromised two weeks ago. Three people arrested, two more in hiding."

"And they need someone to go in and stabilise it," I said.

"Reorganise the courier routes, establish new dead drops, get the network back into operation before the Germans roll it up entirely. Two to three weeks on the ground." He paused. "Your English is part of it — Shepherd wants a direct liaison who can communicate with London without an intermediary. Reduce the chance of another compromised chain."

I sat on the chopping block and looked at the mountains. The same mountains I had retreated into after Narvik, after Kristian died, after Norway's government broadcast its

surrender and everything I had understood about the war had to be rebuilt from nothing. They looked exactly as they always had. Indifferent to human arrangements.

"It's a different kind of operation," I said.

"Everything about what we do now is different from what we were trained for," Dahl replied. "You've handled different before."

This was true. The man who had run a fighting withdrawal across a rocky island hillside in January bore only partial resemblance to the corporal who had watched British ships disappear into the Narvik fjord. I had spent a year adapting, and each adaptation had cost something — comfort, certainty, pieces of whoever I had been before. But it had built something too. I was better at this than I had been. Not comfortable with it, exactly, but competent in a way that felt earned rather than assumed.

"Ingrid?" I asked.

"Already knows. She's the one who flagged your name to Shepherd in the first place, apparently." No judgment in his tone, but I noticed the slight elevation of one eyebrow.

"When do I leave?"

"Four days. There's a labour transport departing from Fauske — workers being sent south for construction projects. Shepherd's people have arranged a place on the manifest."

I nodded and picked up the axe. Dahl took it as the dismissal it was and went back inside.

• • •

The journey south took three days. I travelled as Henrik Aune, a carpenter from Mo i Rana, with papers identifying me as a conscripted labourer assigned to a fortification project outside Oslo. The documents were the best I had ever carried — the quality of SOE's forgery operation had improved considerably since the early days of improvised resistance.

On the train, I shared a compartment with two genuine construction workers who talked the entire journey about wages, food shortages, and a foreman they both despised. Their ordinariness was its own kind of armour. I listened, nodded, contributed occasional remarks that established me as a man too tired to sustain much conversation. By the time we pulled into Østbane station, they had forgotten me entirely.

Oslo hit me differently than Trondheim had.

Trondheim was my home, and its occupation had felt personal, intimate in its wrongness — each changed building a small insult, each German flag on a familiar street a deliberate affront aimed at someone who knew what had been there before. Oslo was Norway's capital, and the occupation there had a different quality. More theatrical. More deliberate. The Germans had decided Oslo was a symbol and were staging it accordingly.

Swastika flags hung from the government buildings on Karl Johans gate not as afterthoughts but as statements, the cloth enormous and very red against the spring sky. German officers moved through the streets with the ease of men who had stopped imagining the city as anything other than conquered territory — who looked at Aker Brygge and saw a German harbour, who looked at the Royal Palace and saw a building

whose legitimate occupant was conveniently absent. The streets were busy but with the muted efficiency of life under surveillance. People moved with purpose and minimal conversation, the particular economy of a city that had learned public space was no longer reliably safe.

I kept my head down and moved.

The boarding house in Sagene was a narrow building on a quiet street, its front door painted the dark green of something kept maintained without advertising the maintenance. Borghild herself answered the knock. She was a large woman somewhere in her late fifties, with a broad, still face and the bearing of someone who had been managing things alone for long enough that help had ceased to be something she expected. She looked at me for a moment with the unhurried assessment of a person who makes decisions based on what she sees rather than what she's been told, then stepped back to let me in.

"Henrik Aune," I said.

"I know who you are," she said, which settled the question of how much she had been told. "Room's at the top. Breakfast at seven, supper at six, no guests. The bathroom is shared with one other boarder — shift worker, he keeps different hours, you won't cross paths much." She handed me a key. "There's hot water between five and eight in the morning."

That was the entirety of the welcome. She went back to the kitchen and I took my bag upstairs.

My contact with Professor Aas was arranged through a series of steps I had memorised before leaving the mountains — a specific bench in Frognerparken, a particular newspaper, a

question about the bronze sculptures surrounding Vigeland's famous obelisk. He was a small, precise man in his sixties with the distracted manner of someone whose mind never fully left the problem it was working on. When I made the recognition approach, he barely looked up from the newspaper in his hands.

"Karl Bergman," I said, using the same cover name I had used in Trondheim. A small economy. Fewer names to keep straight.

"Walk with me," he replied.

We walked for twenty minutes through the park, Aas talking in the measured tones of a man delivering a lecture while I absorbed the situation he described. Three courier routes, each compromised at a different link. One dead drop location known to the Gestapo but being monitored rather than cleared — they were hoping someone would use it. Eleven operatives still active but isolated from each other since the arrests. A radio operator named Marta who had been running transmissions from an apartment in Grünerløkka but had gone quiet ten days ago, her status unknown.

"How much physical surveillance do you have on the remaining operatives?" I asked.

"Minimal. We watch the Gestapo when we can. Their patterns." He paused by one of the massive bronze figures — a man wrestling with a cluster of smaller figures, all of them straining against each other in frozen, permanent struggle. "Wagner's people transferred two officers here from the north in March. New faces. Harder to track."

Wagner. The same SS officer who had been tightening security in the Narvik region the previous summer, evidently promoted and reassigned. The name settled in my chest with the cold weight of recognition. This was not an enemy I was encountering for the first time.

"I need three days to observe before I touch anything," I said. "Courier networks collapse when people move too quickly after a compromise."

Aas nodded. "I expected that. There's a room arranged in Sagene. A woman named Borghild — she runs a boarding house, has done since her husband died. She knows enough to ask nothing."

He gave me the address by describing it in relation to landmarks rather than naming it directly, then folded his newspaper and walked away without another word. The abruptness of it reminded me of Frøya in Trondheim. Resistance had bred a particular economy of expression in these people — nothing said that didn't need to be, nothing kept that needed to be discarded.

• • •

The three days of observation were the most methodical work I had done since the war started.

I moved through Oslo's neighbourhoods in the persona of a construction worker on approved movement passes, cataloguing what I saw with the patient discipline that a year of resistance had built in me. Patrol schedules. Gestapo vehicle patterns. The small signals that distinguished a building under

active surveillance from one that merely looked observed: the same parked car two days running, the man who appeared on three separate corners at three separate times, the woman in the café window who never seemed to be reading the book in front of her.

Oslo under occupation had a particular texture that Trondheim had not quite prepared me for. In Trondheim the occupation sat on top of the city like something placed there that did not entirely fit. In Oslo it had worked its way in deeper — a year of bureaucratic normalisation, of requisitioned offices and registered workers and the slow replacement of Norwegian institutions with German-supervised equivalents. It felt more settled. More permanent. This was something I had to actively resist feeling anything about while I was doing this kind of work.

The city had its own weather — not the mountain weather I had been living inside for months, the bone-cold that came off the heights with the smell of pine and snow, but something damper, the sea-smell of the Oslo fjord mixing with coal smoke and the particular closed-off quality of a large city in the second year of occupation. The streets were wet from a recent rain. The buildings I walked past were unchanged in themselves but framed differently by what now stood in front of them — checkpoints, notices, the occasional German vehicle moving through traffic with the right-of-way that came from being in a city you had taken by force.

I ate in workers' canteens, listened to conversations, watched the way people navigated the ordinary checkpoints with the micro-adjustments of the long-occupied: papers produced smoothly, eyes down, the performance of

harmlessness that had become a daily skill. Children moved differently than adults — they had grown up with this, for them the checkpoints were simply part of the street, without the faint wrong-note quality that the adults still carried.

On the second day I passed the university. The building stood as it always had, its neoclassical facade unchanged, but the German flag over the main entrance and the notice board inside the gate — regulations, registration requirements, approved topics for public assembly — made it something else. I thought of Aas in there, year after year of lectures on whatever the Germans permitted, maintaining the surface of normal academic life while a courier network operated underneath it. The particular discipline that required was different from anything I had learned in the mountains. I was not sure I could have managed it.

Marta, the radio operator, I found on the second day.

She had not gone quiet because she was captured or dead. She had moved the transmitter to a new location after spotting what she believed was surveillance on her building, and had been operating on an off-schedule rotation that the network hadn't been informed of. She was alive, careful, and furious about the breakdown in communication. When I made contact through an intermediary Aas trusted, she gave me a look that suggested she had been waiting for someone competent to arrive for the better part of two weeks.

"New schedule," she said, in the flat tone of a professional being given information she should already have had. "Every third day. Rotating frequencies. I've been transmitting to

Shepherd without acknowledgment — they need to know I'm still operational."

"I'll pass it through," I said. "And I need everything you've logged in the past six weeks."

She handed it over without hesitation. Years of accumulated intelligence on German movements through Oslo, shipping activity in the harbour, troop rotations, the construction of new fortifications on the coast south of the city. Marta had been doing the work of three people, alone, in silence, with no confirmation that anyone was receiving it. She was perhaps thirty-five, with the concentrated energy of someone who had decided that frustration was too expensive to maintain and had converted it entirely into productivity.

"How have you been managing?" I asked.

"The same way everyone manages," she said. "By not stopping." She began rolling the logs for transit. "The arrests hurt us. Kristoffersen was the backbone of the northern courier route — he knew which households could be trusted, which couldn't, who was under pressure. That knowledge went with him when they took him." She paused. "I don't know what they've done with him."

"I know," I said. It was all there was to say.

The network's problem, I came to understand, was not incompetence or cowardice. It was structure. The courier chain had been built on personal relationships, which meant that when one person was arrested, the connections collapsed with them. What was needed were routes that didn't depend on any single person knowing more than their immediate link.

I spent the second week rebuilding. New dead drop locations — none of them in places that had been used before, none shared between more than two operatives. A simplified communication system using signals visible from public spaces. A fallback protocol that any operative could initiate without needing to contact anyone else first. Methodical, unglamorous work, and the most useful thing I had done in months.

Borghild, during this time, occupied the edges of my days in the way of people who are present without insisting on it. Breakfast at seven, supper at six, exactly as stated. She cooked with the economy of someone producing adequate food from inadequate ingredients, which in occupied Norway in the second year of rationing required a kind of creativity she performed without apparent effort. She asked me nothing. She noticed things — the tiredness some mornings, the late returns — and communicated her noticing through adjustments: the coffee kept warm past its hour, the extra bread at supper. She did not remark on any of it. She simply accounted for what was in front of her.

Once, in the second week, I came down for water at an odd hour and found her at the kitchen table with a letter and a glass of something that was not water. She folded the letter before I could see it and looked at me with the expression of someone who has been interrupted in a private moment and is deciding how much it matters.

"Couldn't sleep," I said.

She poured a second glass and pushed it across the table. Aquavit, home-brewed, sharp and clean. We sat for a while in

the kitchen without talking, which was its own kind of conversation.

"Your son?" I asked, after a while. I had seen the photograph on the mantelpiece — a young man in work clothes, grinning at whoever held the camera.

"Somewhere in Germany," she said. "Forced labour. Eight months now." A pause. "I receive cards. Standard form, pre-approved text. He is well. He is being treated fairly."

"I'm glad."

She looked at me over her glass. "Are you doing something useful?" she asked, in the direct manner of a person who had decided indirect questions were a waste of time she didn't have.

"I am," I said.

She nodded, as though this settled something, and went back to her glass. We finished our drinks and went to bed without another word, and she asked me nothing further for the rest of the time I was there.

• • •

It was Aas who brought me the intelligence that changed the shape of the remaining week.

He appeared at the boarding house on a Thursday evening — his first visit, unannounced, which told me something had moved. Borghild let him in without a word and went back to the kitchen. He came up to my room and settled into the single chair with the manner of a man accustomed to thinking in inadequate furniture.

"There is a meeting," he said. "Tomorrow evening. Terboven's administrative staff and a group of German industrial planners. At the Britannia Hotel." One of the city's better establishments, requisitioned and now operating as an officers' facility. "Among the accompanying staff is a Major Ritter — logistics officer for the northern naval command." He removed his glasses to clean them with his handkerchief, the habitual gesture I had come to recognise as his version of emphasis. "Shepherd has been looking for the northern coastal submarine installation plans for three months. According to my contact, Ritter is carrying them."

I worked through the problem. "His room?"

"Third floor, east wing. Formal dinner at eight. He'll be at table for at least two hours." He replaced his glasses. "The briefcase will be in the room. These men don't trust safe deposit arrangements in occupied territory, and they are right not to."

"Security on the floor?"

"German security throughout the building, but concentrated at the entrance and ground level during events. The upper floors are considered secure." A slight pause that conveyed what he thought of that assessment. "There is also a laundress I believe you should speak to. Her name is Solveig. She can confirm the room assignment."

I looked at him. He had the careful neutrality of a man who had thought something through and was now watching someone else think it through.

"How long have you been running this network?" I asked.

"Since November of 1940." Said without pride or complaint. "It began as a reading group. We were sharing books the Germans had prohibited — not as a political act, but because the prohibition was intellectually insulting. Then we began passing other things alongside the books. Before long we had a structure." He picked up his hat. "I am a historian by training. I have spent my career trying to understand how things become what they are. It is somewhat confronting to find oneself inside a process one has previously studied from the outside."

"Do you have family?"

"A sister in Bergen. We exchange approved correspondence." He stood. "I do not think about it very often. It is more useful not to."

After he left I sat with the hotel map for a long time. Then I went downstairs and asked Borghild if I could use her telephone.

• • •

That evening I sat with the hotel map until I had the floor plan in my head the way I had the mountain ridgelines — not as a drawing but as a space I could move through without looking. Service stairs, maintenance corridor, the door marked *Personalgang*, the utility access behind 312's east wall. Halvard's confirmed timings. The guard's cigarette break at half-past eight. Twenty minutes, consistent.

I thought about what I was going to do in that room. Not the plan — the plan was clear — but the texture of it. The

briefcase on the desk. The documents inside it. A German officer two floors below at a dinner table, pouring wine, talking about the war as though it were something happening to other people, while a Norwegian resistance fighter stood in his room copying the plans he carried.

There was something satisfying about it that I had not felt about the more direct operations — the firefights, the rearguard actions, the shooting of patrol dogs in the dark. This was something else. This was using what they thought was their city, their hotel, their security, against them. Using their assumptions. Their habitual guard who would be on the fire escape at half-past eight because he always was. Their complacency.

Borghild knocked at seven and said supper was ready. I folded the map and went down.

She had made fish soup from something I could not identify and bread that was more flour than grain, and it was hot and sufficient and she set it on the table without comment. We ate in the way we had eaten all week — in the same room, not quite in silence, not quite in conversation.

"You'll be out late tonight," she said. It was not a question.

"Yes."

She nodded. She refilled my bowl without asking. "The man who was here before you," she said, after a while. "He stayed three weeks. He was from Stavanger. He never told me what he did either." She paused. "He did not come back after the third week."

I looked at her.

"I'm not saying it to frighten you," she said. "I'm saying it because I think you should know that I understand what this is. What people who stay in my house are doing." She stood and began clearing the table. "Get some sleep before you go."

• • •

Eriksen arrived the next morning carrying a toolbox and conscripted labourer's papers, looking exactly like what his papers said he was: a man who had been doing physical work in the cold for months and was not pleased about it. He did it well, Eriksen. He did everything well.

We went over the plan in my room while the house was quiet.

"The copying device?" I asked.

"Shepherd sent it in the last drop." He opened the toolbox and showed me the compact camera mechanism, wrapped in oilcloth. "Nine documents maximum before the film requires changing. If the briefcase has more than nine, we prioritise."

"The submarine installation plans are the priority. Everything else secondary."

He nodded. "The hotel contact — Solveig confirmed him?"

"A man named Halvard. He's worked the hotel since before the war, been part of Aas's network for six months. He knows the service routes."

"Two hours at dinner." Eriksen studied the map. "Tighter than Trondheim."

"Different risk profile. If anything goes wrong on my side, you don't come in. You take the equipment back to Marta and wait for contact."

"And if there's no contact?"

"Then you haven't heard from me and you don't know anything about a hotel operation."

He accepted this with the quiet gravity of a man who had been in enough of these conversations to know that acceptance was all you could usefully do.

• • •

Halvard met me at the service entrance at quarter past eight, when the dinner had been underway for twenty minutes. He was a slight, grey man of perhaps fifty with the professionally unreadable face of someone who had spent thirty years dealing with hotel guests. He carried a clipboard and moved with the unhurried purpose of a man who belonged in every corridor of the building.

"Third floor is clear," he said, without greeting. "One guard at the corridor end. He takes a cigarette on the fire escape at half-past. Twenty minutes, consistent."

"Does he vary it?"

"Not in six weeks of observation." A pause that communicated his assessment of a guard who didn't vary his routine. "A man of considerable habit."

We went up the service stairs. The maintenance corridor behind the east wing ran the full length of the floor, accessed

through a door Halvard unlocked without breaking stride. Room 312's access was a ventilation cover, two screws. Beyond it: a narrow utility space behind the east wall, no wider than a man's shoulders, where you could hear everything in the room and see nothing.

Halvard checked his watch. "I'll be in the corridor. If the guard changes his routine, two knocks on the utility door."

He left. I waited in the dark.

Waiting in confined spaces had become something I was competent at. The mountain positions, the cliff crevice on Værøy, the various places over the past year where staying still in the dark had been the operational requirement — I had learned to take my pulse down, to let the breathing go shallow and regular, to treat the wait as its own task rather than the space before the task. The body wanted to read danger into uncertainty and you had to teach it otherwise, which was a discipline and not a feeling.

The sounds from the room were ordinary: the heating pipes doing their work, the building's ambient settling, the distant murmur of the dinner two floors below. I listened to the dinner sounds for a while — the indistinct rise and fall of conversation, the occasional clink of glassware, things happening in a lit room full of men who believed themselves to be in a secure building in a city they controlled. Below me in the maintenance corridor the smell was of dust and old pipe-lagging, the smell of a building's interior life, nothing that was supposed to be looked at.

I thought about what was in the briefcase. Not the documents as intelligence — I would think about them as

intelligence when they were photographed and on their way to Marta. Now they were an object in a room I was about to enter, and the distance between where I was and where they were was the distance I needed to cross without anything going wrong.

Half-past eight came and went. No knocks. The guard was on the fire escape with his cigarette, a man of considerable habit, exactly as Halvard had said.

Three additional minutes past the window. Then I eased the panel open from the maintenance side.

The room was empty and orderly in the way of a man who kept his kit exactly so. Uniform jacket on the wardrobe door, polished boots beside it. The briefcase on the writing desk, latched but not locked — the security of a man who assumed his surroundings were controlled.

I worked through the latches and opened it.

Nine documents. I photographed them in sequence, then stopped on the fifth. The submarine installation plans were there — coastal surveys, construction specifications, projected timelines. And alongside them, something Shepherd had not known to ask for: a routing document showing proposed coordination between the northern facilities and the Atlantic convoy lanes. Not just where the installations would be. What they were built to do.

Footsteps in the corridor.

Not Halvard's two-knock warning. A single set, military boots, approaching without slowing.

The briefcase was open on the desk. The copying device was in my hands. The room offered one piece of cover: the wardrobe door, standing open against the wall.

I closed the briefcase with one hand, crossed the room in three steps, and pressed myself behind the wardrobe door. It was inadequate and I knew it was inadequate. I held the camera against my chest and stopped breathing.

The door handle moved.

Turned down.

Then a voice from further along the corridor — another man, calling something. The first man answered without opening the door. A brief exchange, footsteps separating, both moving away.

I stayed behind the wardrobe door and counted to sixty. Then I returned to the desk, reopened the briefcase, and finished photographing the remaining four documents. The routing coordination document. The construction schedule. All nine, in sequence, latched back as I had found them.

I was in the maintenance corridor with the panel re-secured when Halvard reappeared.

"Guard came back early," he said, with the look of a man revising an assessment. "Stomach trouble."

"I know," I said.

He looked at me carefully. "Everything in order?"

"Everything in order."

• • •

Eriksen was in the utility room at the base of the service stairs, equipment laid out in the precise way he laid everything out. He took the camera without a word and began extracting the film, his hands working with the unhurried focus he brought to all technical tasks, as though the circumstances had no bearing on what his hands were doing.

He was on the fourth document when the footsteps came.

Different from the corridor above — heavier, multiple, the sound of more than one person moving with intent. Eriksen heard them the same moment I did. His eyes came up.

Three seconds. Four.

He looked back down and continued.

The footsteps passed the utility room door without slowing. Eriksen finished all nine documents and packaged the film with the same deliberate care he had started with.

"Done," he said.

The copies were in Marta's hands before midnight. Encoded and transmitted to Shepherd before dawn.

• • •

I sat in Borghild's kitchen in the early morning, the city coming to life outside the blackout curtains, an ersatz coffee that tasted of burnt grain warming my hands.

The relief after an operation was always physical first. Shoulders releasing. Jaw unclenching. The restoration of ordinary breathing. Then behind it, the particular quality of consciousness that arrives when you have been at the edge of

something bad and have not gone over — not euphoria, never that, but a sharpening. Each detail of the kitchen with unusual clarity: the grain of the table, the pale morning pressing at the curtain edges, the sounds of a city beginning its occupied day.

Eriksen was asleep in the next room. Aas had gone home after confirming the transmission. Marta was preparing her next scheduled contact.

Borghild came down earlier than usual. She put bread on the table without explanation and went to the window, looking out at the street in the way she sometimes did in the morning, as though checking that the world was still arranged as she had left it.

"It went well?" she asked, with her back to me.

"Yes."

She nodded, still looking at the street. A German staff car moved through below, unhurried, authoritative. She watched it pass.

"My son," she said. "They took him in November. Construction project, they called it. He's twenty-three. Strong — he used to carry the furniture when neighbours moved. Now he's building things for Germany." She turned from the window. "I receive cards every few weeks. Standard form. He is well, he is being treated fairly, the camp is adequate."

I said nothing. There was nothing useful to say.

She looked at me across the kitchen. "My son is somewhere in Germany," she said. "Somebody should do something useful."

The simplicity of it landed with the force of a thing that has been reduced to its smallest possible true form. Not a political statement. Not even courage in the ordinary sense. Just the plain account of a woman who had looked at her situation and reached the only conclusion available to a person of her kind: that inaction, when action was possible, was its own form of choosing.

I thought of Kristian, who had believed Norway would never truly fall. Of Larsen, who had stayed in his boat when he could have run because his knowledge of the coastline was worth something and he intended to use it while he could. Of Dahl, who had fought one war already and come back for another without ceremony. Of Haugen, whose fate we still did not know but whose voice I could still hear in a dozen cold field briefings. Of Ingrid, who had rowed a dinghy to a rocky shore because the standard protocol said to wait and she had decided she disagreed.

Of Aas, who had turned a reading group into a courier network because the prohibition on books was intellectually insulting, and had been running it for a year and a half under occupation, maintaining his lectures and his faculty meetings and his ordinary visible life while intelligence moved through the building underneath it all.

Of Marta, doing the work of three people alone in silence, transmitting into the void without acknowledgement, because stopping was the alternative and stopping was not something she was built for.

Each of them had arrived, through entirely different paths, at the same thing Borghild had just said. Somebody should do

something useful. And, following from it with the simplicity of a mathematical proof: I am somebody.

The decision I had made outside Narvik — to walk into the eastern forest instead of down the main road — had not been a single decision. It had been the first in a long chain, each one smaller and more specific than the last, each building on what the previous ones had made possible. I was not the man who had pressed himself into the snow while a bullet splintered the tree centimetres from his head. That man had been frightened and stubborn and more than a little naive about what fighting for Norway would actually ask of him.

The man in Borghild's kitchen had carried a copying device into an occupied hotel room and photographed documents behind a wardrobe door with a guard twenty metres away. Had learned to sleep in cliff crevices. Had buried a friend in the ground and kept moving. Had learned what he was made of not by looking inward but by finding out what the situation required each time and choosing, each time, to provide it.

This was, I understood that morning, what resistance actually was. Not the operations, not the intelligence, not the sabotage, though all of those mattered. It was the daily decision, made again by each person in the network, by every resistance fighter across Norway, by Borghild in her kitchen and Aas in his lecture hall and Marta at her transmitter — the decision to be somebody, and to do something useful with it.

"Thank you," I said to Borghild. "For the room. And for more than the room."

She considered whether this required acknowledgement. “You can stay through the end of the week,” she said. “After that I have a new boarder.”

That was its own kind of answer.

I finished my coffee, thanked her, and went to wake Eriksen. We had papers for a northbound labour transport departing at noon. By tomorrow night, if nothing went wrong, I would be back in the mountains.

There was work left to do.

CHAPTER 10

Resolution

• • •

The news came on a Tuesday.

It came the way most important things came during the occupation — not in a single dramatic moment but as a slow accumulation of signals. The German patrols thinning over the preceding week. The checkpoints unmanned on roads that had been controlled for five years. A particular quality of silence from the garrison in Bodø that Eriksen, who had developed a near-instinctive understanding of German administrative behaviour over four years, described simply as the silence of men who had received orders they did not yet know how to process.

Then the radio.

The BBC broadcast that we had been monitoring illegally since 1940, through static and German jamming and the rotating battery problems of three successive radio sets, spoke the words we had been waiting five years to hear.

Germany had surrendered. The war in Europe was over. It was the eighth of May, 1945.

Dahl heard it before any of us. He came to find me in the woodshed where I was doing the same work I had been doing when Shepherd's first message arrived four years earlier — splitting firewood, the axe and the block, the ordinary maintenance of a life conducted in the mountains. He stood in the doorway for a moment without speaking. Just looked at me with an expression I had never seen on his face before and could not immediately classify. Not relief, exactly. Not triumph. Something more complicated than either, the expression of a man arriving at a destination he has been moving toward for so long that the arrival itself has become strange.

"It's done," he said.

I set down the axe.

We stood there in the pale May sunlight — both of us, apparently, uncertain what one was supposed to do with the end of the thing that had organised every waking hour of the past five years. The mountains looked the same. The birch trees at the edge of the clearing had leafed out overnight, the way they did in May with the particular sudden insistence of northern spring, indifferent to the significance of this particular morning.

After a while, Eriksen appeared from the farmhouse. Then Nielsen. Then Bergmann, who had survived everything and had at some point in the previous year stopped cleaning his rifle in the corner and started cleaning it beside the fire with everyone else, a small migration nobody had remarked on but everyone had noticed. They came out into the clearing one at a time and stood in the sunlight.

Nobody cheered.

I had expected cheering, or something like it — the discharge of five years of tension in a single overwhelming moment. What I had not expected was this: eight people standing in a mountain clearing in the early morning of the eighth of May, 1945, not quite knowing what to do with themselves. The sun on the birch leaves. The silence that was different from all the other silences we had occupied, because this one was not the silence of waiting or the silence of concealment but simply silence — the absence of a thing that had been present for so long its absence was itself a kind of sound.

I looked at the people around me. Eriksen, standing very still with his hands at his sides, his face doing something it almost never did — nothing, absolutely nothing, a complete suspension of the careful neutrality he wore as a working expression, as though the news had temporarily dissolved the habit. Nielsen, who had joined us in the summer of 1940 with his naval officer's precision and had spent five years applying it to problems naval officers were not trained for, was looking at the mountains with the expression of a man reviewing an account and finding it to balance. Bergmann, who had never told anyone why he had stayed in the eastern forest rather than

surrendering and had showed no sign of starting, stood with his hands clasped in front of him and his head slightly bowed, which was either prayer or something that looked enough like it from the outside that the distinction didn't matter.

Ingrid was looking at me. When I met her eyes she offered a small nod — the resistance fighter's acknowledgment, the one that said: we did it, the thing we said we were doing is done. There was more than that in it. There was also everything we had not yet had the conditions to say directly, which was a conversation for later when the conditions existed.

Dahl said: "I'll make coffee." He went back inside, and this broke something, and the others began to talk. Small things at first, practical things — where they would go, what route down from the mountains, who would need to send word to family. The large things could wait. The large things had been waiting for five years and could wait another hour.

I walked to the edge of the clearing and looked at the mountains and gave myself a few minutes that were not practical.

I walked to the edge of the clearing and looked at the mountains.

Somewhere in them — in crevices and caves and long-abandoned shepherd's huts and the holds of boats now returned to fishing — the equipment of resistance was distributed across the landscape. Rifles. Radio sets. Codebooks. The physical residue of five years of a different kind of war. It would be found and collected and catalogued, eventually. Or not found, and weathering into the mountains alongside everything else that disappeared.

I thought about Kristian.

Not for the first time that morning — I had been thinking about him since before Dahl appeared in the doorway, in the half-conscious way you think about people who are permanently present at the edges of your attention. But with more deliberateness now. The particular quality of a thought you owe to someone: here is the news. Here is the thing we said we were doing it for.

He had been certain, even at the end. He had taken a sniper's bullet in the soft light of an early morning outside Narvik and had spent his last conscious minutes telling me to continue, which was the same thing he had always been telling me. Norway will not fall. Go on.

Norway had not fallen. Germany had.

He would have had something to say about it. Something dry and precisely aimed, the way he had when he was pleased about something and didn't want to show it too openly. I could hear the tone without being able to fill in the words, which was perhaps the most honest account of grief available at this distance: the rhythm of a person preserved, the content no longer recoverable.

I went inside for the coffee.

• • •

"Haugen," I said, when we were sitting at the table.

Dahl set down his cup.

We had learned in February what most of us had suspected since his capture. He had died in Grini, the German detention camp outside Oslo, in the winter of 1943. The camp records, when they were eventually obtained, would show the cause of death as illness. The men who had been there with him would later describe something more deliberately administered than that.

The knowledge had arrived in February with the careful neutrality of confirmed intelligence — a fact, sourced and corroborated, slotted into the understanding we already had of how these things tended to go. I had noted it and continued. There was nothing else available to do in February of 1945 with the war still running. You noted the fact and continued.

Now the war was no longer running.

"He knew what he was doing when he walked out of that tent," Dahl said. "He always knew."

This was true. Haugen had understood what choosing resistance meant and had chosen it anyway, from the first night in the eastern forest when twenty-three men stepped out of the dark and he spread his maps on a door balanced on ammunition crates. He had been a man who carried the weight of other people's choices as though they were his own, and he had done it without complaint or self-pity, and the Germans had eventually found a way to make him pay for it.

"He was a good officer," Eriksen said. He said it in the flat way Eriksen said most things, which meant he had thought about it carefully before saying it.

Nobody offered anything more. We sat with Haugen for a while, in the way you sit with the dead when there is no body to sit with and the sitting has to happen inside you instead.

Later, when the others had gone to begin the practical business of coming down from the mountains, I sat alone at the table and allowed myself what I had not been able to allow in February: the actual weight of it. The briefings in cold farmhouses. The way he had absorbed difficult intelligence without showing anything but the steady determination to act on it correctly. The specific dignity with which he had stood at the edge of the surrendering men at the end of the Narvik campaign and made space for whatever they decided, because the men in front of him were the thing he was responsible for and he knew it.

He had been thirty-four years old when the Germans took him. His wife was in Bergen. I did not know if they had children.

There were too many people I did not know well enough, and would not have the chance to know better, and this was the cost the war had collected from the living as well as from the dead: all the time and all the knowing that had been spent on other things and could not be recovered.

I sat at the table for a while, in the morning of the day the war ended, and let this be what it was.

The two days between the eighth of May and the tenth passed in a particular strangeness.

The war was over but the mountains were the same mountains. The farmhouse was the same farmhouse. The routines that had governed five years of resistance life — the

watch rotations, the radio schedules, the operational security that had become as automatic as breathing — did not dissolve immediately. They dissolved slowly, each person abandoning them at their own pace, sometimes catching themselves performing a habit that no longer had a function and having to consciously set it down.

Eriksen dismantled the radio set on the afternoon of the eighth, working with the same methodical care he brought to everything. He did not dismantle it because it needed to be dismantled immediately. He dismantled it because it was a task with a clear procedure and a definite end point, and this was what he needed that afternoon.

Dahl spent most of the eighth sitting at the table with the maps spread in front of him, not looking at them so much as allowing the familiar objects to occupy the space around him while he thought whatever he was thinking. Once I came in from outside and found him simply sitting, hands flat on the table, not asleep and not reading, in the particular stillness of a man who has arrived at something and is not yet ready to move away from it.

I did not disturb him.

We cooked a proper meal on the evening of the eighth, using the stored provisions that had always been maintained with the operational discipline of people who could not afford to run short. There was enough for something almost lavish by the standards of the past five years — proper soup, real bread, the last of the coffee. We ate together around the table and talked without the low-level monitoring of the conversation for

operational content, which produced a quality of conversation I had almost forgotten was possible.

Bergmann told a story about his life before the war. It was the first time I had heard him volunteer personal information of any kind, and the story itself was unremarkable — he had worked on a fishing trawler out of Ålesund, had a sister in Bergen, had been engaged once to a woman who had moved to Sweden in 1938. He told it in the flat, factual tone he told everything, without apparent awareness that it was the first such story he had told, and nobody commented on this either. It was simply what the evening made space for.

We moved down on the tenth.

• • •

The Germans in Norway laid down their arms over the following days with the organised thoroughness that had characterised everything they did. Columns of soldiers moved through the streets of Norwegian cities, some still in full kit, all of them wearing an expression I recognised from my own low points during the resistance years — the look of a person who has arrived somewhere they cannot quite believe and does not yet know how to inhabit.

We came down from the mountains on the tenth of May, moving in daylight for the first time without the constant calculation of patrol schedules and sightlines. The sensation was peculiar. After five years of treating every open space as a potential exposure, walking openly along a road felt less like

freedom and more like a reflex the body had lost and was slowly, tentatively attempting to recover.

Ingrid walked beside me. We had not spoken much since the capitulation announcement — there was a great deal to say and no particular pressure to say it immediately, which was its own form of relief. The relationship that had formed between us over five years of shared work and shared danger had never been adequately named, in part because the conditions had not permitted the naming and in part because we had both understood that naming it might make it fragile in circumstances that required it not to be fragile. Now the circumstances had changed. We were both discovering that peace required different kinds of attention than war, and that the adjustment was not automatic.

"What does it look like?" she asked.

"What does what look like?"

"Everything. When you imagine going back. What does it look like?"

The question required more thought than it might have, because I had spent five years training myself not to imagine going back. Hope of that specific variety was a liability in resistance work. You kept your mind on the current operation, the immediate problem, the next eight hours. The future was an abstraction that could wait.

"The fjord," I said finally. "The smell of it in the morning before the fishing boats go out. Salt and cold and something green underneath." I considered. "My mother's voice. I can still hear it, but I'm not certain I'd recognise it on the street."

Ingrid's hand found mine. She had become adept at these gestures over the years — present enough to register, measured enough not to claim more than the moment contained. I had learned to receive them in kind.

"What about you?" I asked.

"The university," she said without hesitation. "History. I applied before the invasion and was accepted. Then the Germans came." She said it without bitterness, which I found remarkable. "I assume it will reopen properly."

"It will."

"You could teach," she said. "Languages. You mentioned it once."

"That was a different person's idea."

"The idea survived. Even if the person changed."

• • •

Narvik from a distance looked smaller than I remembered.

Cities often did, coming back to them after years away — the childhood version of any place occupies a larger space in the imagination than the actual geography warrants. But what surprised me was not the smallness. It was the degree to which it simply looked like itself. I had half-expected the occupation to have left something structural behind, some visible residue in the buildings or the layout of the streets, and instead the town from the approach road was just Narvik: the fjord the same grey-blue, the mountains above holding their shapes against the May sky exactly as they always had.

The German signs were being taken down from the building facades. The flags were gone from the civic buildings. Evidence of the practical work of ending an occupation, which turned out to look a great deal like municipal maintenance.

I did not go to my family's house immediately.

I had sent word through resistance channels that I was alive and returning, but the message was weeks old and the channels it had travelled through were not reliable for nuance. My parents knew I was coming. They did not know when, and I did not know what five years of occupation would have done to them specifically — what version of not-knowing their son was alive would be legible in their faces when I knocked on the door.

There are reunions that need a moment's preparation. Not to rehearse what you will say, because nothing you can rehearse will be adequate, but to settle into the reality of the thing before the thing actually happens. To give yourself the time to understand what you are about to receive.

I walked the harbour instead.

The wharves had been used heavily for German supply operations throughout the occupation, and there was evidence of this in the condition of the dock infrastructure — the wear patterns, the modifications to the loading equipment, the particular arrangement of structures that had served a different purpose for five years. But the fishing boats were out on the water. This fact was more steadying than anything I could have told myself.

At the far end of the main wharf, a group of people were gathered around someone's portable radio. As I drew closer I heard what they were listening to: an announcement that King

Haakon would return from London. The date was not yet fixed, but it was coming. The King was coming home.

I thought of the photograph on the wall of the first resistance hideout, the winter of 1940: *Troskap*. Loyalty. Someone had pinned it up as a statement of intent in a cabin full of men who had walked into a forest rather than surrender, and it had functioned as one for everything that followed.

Norway had kept faith.

• • •

My mother opened the door before I reached the step.

She had been watching from the window — a habit, I understood later, that she had maintained for years. Standing at the window at intervals through the day. Not waiting specifically — she had no way to know when I was coming, only that I was alive and on my way — but a body's way of keeping itself oriented toward something it needed.

She was smaller than I remembered. Not diminished, exactly — she had the same precise bearing, the same quality of economy in her movements, the same face. But the scale of her had shifted in my memory over five years in the way things shift when you carry them a long distance without being able to put them down: they are real when you finally hold them again, but the dimensions are not quite what you had been carrying.

She looked at me for a long moment without speaking. Verifying, I thought — the way you verify something you believe to be true but need to confirm with more than just the mind before you allow yourself to act on it.

Then she took my face in both hands, the way she had on the morning I left, and looked at me directly with an expression that contained several years' worth of things she had not been able to say to anyone.

"Come inside," she said.

My father was in his chair by the radio. He had lost weight and moved with the careful deliberateness that suggested his leg had worsened over the years — the old war shrapnel that had always bothered him in the cold, now evidently bothering him more broadly. He looked at me from the chair with an expression that was not quite the one my mother had worn. Where she had verified, he assessed: taking inventory of who had come back and what he had brought with him from the years he had been gone.

"You could have written," he said, at last.

"The postal system was unreliable," I replied.

A pause. Then he made the sound that was approximately a laugh — the one that acknowledged a fair point without entirely conceding it — and I crossed the room and put my arms around him carefully, minding the leg, and he held on with a strength that surprised me.

My mother made coffee. Real coffee, somehow obtained in the general reordering of supply lines that followed capitulation — the smell of it was so specifically itself, so precisely the smell of that kitchen in the mornings before everything changed, that it required a moment before I could speak.

We sat at the kitchen table.

Outside the window, Narvik was doing what it was doing: coming back to itself in stages, the occupation being dismantled piece by piece while underneath it the ordinary life of the town reasserted its patterns. I could hear the street from here. People moving, talking at a volume that was already different from the occupation's careful quiet.

The coffee was real and the cups were the same cups and the table was the same table and the window gave onto the same view it had always given onto, and all of this was true simultaneously with the fact that the people sitting around it had been through five years that had not left any of these things the same.

My mother's hair had gone fully grey. She had been going grey before the invasion — I had noticed it the year I left for my military service, the particular way it had changed her colouring — but it had completed itself now, and it looked right on her, settled, the way things look when they have become what they are rather than what they are becoming. She held her cup in both hands the way she always had and asked her questions with the directness she always had, and she was entirely herself, and the five years showed in none of the ways I had feared and in certain ways I had not anticipated.

She wanted to know about the resistance specifically. Not the operations — she did not ask about the operations — but the structure of it, the people, how it had been organised. She had a professional interest in how things worked, my mother, applied to everything she encountered, and she applied it now. Who had led the cell after Haugen. How the intelligence networks had communicated with London. What the British drops had contained and how they had been used.

I answered as fully as I could. My father listened and occasionally asked a question of his own — more strategic in nature, larger in frame, the questions of a man who had been trying to understand the shape of a war he could only see pieces of.

"Your English was useful," he said at one point. Not a question.

"More than I expected."

"I assumed it would be." He looked at me with the expression that was his version of saying more. "I always thought you underestimated how much it was worth."

I did not tell them everything. Some of it was mine to carry, and some of it belonged to people who were not there to speak for themselves, and some of it would require more distance than five days had provided before I could speak of it in a way that conveyed what it had actually been rather than just the surface facts of what occurred.

I told them about Kristian.

My mother was quiet for a moment, and then said that she already knew. Through the networks that had persisted even in occupied Trondheim — the informal systems by which Norwegians had maintained knowledge of each other through the official silence. She had known since late 1940, through a chain of people she named carefully, each one a small piece of what had passed between a sniper's bullet outside Narvik and this kitchen table.

"I didn't want to be certain," she said. "Knowing through networks isn't the same as knowing from you."

"I know," I said.

She listened anyway. I told her what I could of who he had been in the war — not the fighting, but the person. How his optimism had changed into something quieter and more durable without losing its essential character. How he had been absolutely certain, even at the end, that Norway would not fall.

"He was a good boy," she said. The simplest possible statement and the most accurate available.

"He was," I said.

We sat with that for a while. My father refilled the coffee cups and did not say anything, which was his way of giving space to something that needed space.

After a time, he said: "I understand you were useful to the British."

"In some ways."

"Blackwood?"

I looked at him. "You know about Blackwood?"

"I know various things." He set down his cup with the manner of a man who has information he has been holding for some time and is considering how much of it to release. "He sent a letter in late 1942 through channels I still don't entirely understand. Said you had been an asset to Allied operations and that he hoped you were still alive and that if you weren't you should know your father was proud of you." He paused. "I thought that was a well-constructed sentence."

I thought of Blackwood on the transport ship in the evening light of the Narvik fjord, a small figure at distance. Whether he

had seen my raised hand I had never known. Apparently he had been thinking about me regardless, and had thought about my father too.

"I should write to him," I said.

"You should." My father looked at me with the direct look that was his equivalent of something most people would have expressed differently. "You should write to everyone. You've apparently had quite a few years."

This was the closest he came, that afternoon, to saying what the five years had cost them in the specific sense — not the occupation, not the war, but the not-knowing. The weight of it had lived in this kitchen while I had been in the mountains, and it had made my mother smaller and my father's leg worse and had turned a window-watching into a habit sustained through years of not knowing whether the next arrival at the door would be news of another kind.

I stayed for dinner and for the first night. My old room was unchanged in the deliberate way of things left preserved rather than merely untouched — the books on the shelf in the same order, the desk clear in the way it had been when I used it for studying. My mother had maintained it as a fact about the world she intended to keep true.

I lay awake for a long time in the quiet of a room that had no patrols to listen for, no radio schedules to maintain, no operational requirement governing the allocation of sleep. Just the sounds of Narvik at night in May, and the knowledge that the door at the end of the hall was not a tactical position but simply a door.

• • •

King Haakon returned to Norway on the seventh of June. I watched him come ashore in Oslo on a small radio set in a café in Narvik, surrounded by people I did not know, all of us listening to the same broadcast. The commentator's voice was unsteady in a way that broadcast voices were not supposed to be, and nobody in the café commented on this.

When it was over, a man at the next table — older, fisherman's hands, the look of someone who had spent the occupation in this same harbour — raised his coffee cup in a brief, private gesture. Not a toast to the room. Just an acknowledgment, offered to no one in particular, of a thing that had been completed.

I understood it precisely. After five years, you developed a particular relationship to ceremony. The internal marking of a moment, without requirement for audience or confirmation, became habitual. Resistance had been full of such moments — operations that succeeded in silence, arrivals and departures with no one to witness them, decisions made in mountain shelters while the country slept. You became accustomed to the work mattering without the mattering being visible.

The return of the King was not mine to celebrate publicly. I had done the work. The work had contributed to this outcome in ways too diffuse to trace and too small to catalogue. That had always been sufficient, which was part of why it had been possible to keep doing it.

• • •

In July a letter arrived from England.

The handwriting on the envelope was unfamiliar, but the name above the return address was not. Private — now Mister — Thomas Cooper, of Wakefield, Yorkshire.

He had found me through Captain Blackwood, who had apparently maintained a list of Norwegian contacts from the campaign and had been quietly checking on them as circumstances permitted. Cooper wrote that he had thought about writing for a year before actually doing it, and that he was sorry it had taken so long, and that he still owed me a tour of his hometown if I ever found myself in the north of England, which he acknowledged was unlikely but wanted the offer to stand regardless.

He had survived. France, North Africa, Italy. Made it home to Wakefield in the summer of 1945, most of himself intact — his words. He was working in his father's hardware shop. He had recently become engaged.

I read the letter twice, then set it on the table beside the window. Outside, a Norwegian street in July, the long northern light making the afternoon last in the way it always had. Somewhere in Wakefield, Yorkshire, a former private with harmonica-playing hands was working in his father's shop and had thought carefully for a year about whether to write a letter to a Norwegian soldier he had met once for a few weeks in 1940.

I got out paper and wrote back the same evening. I told him I was glad he had survived, that Norway was finding its way back to itself in the way that places do when given enough time and stubbornness. I told him the offer of the tour was noted and that I might one day take him up on it.

I did not tell him about Kristian. That story belonged to people who had been there for it, and Cooper had been twenty years old and far from home in the spring of 1940 and had done what he could, which was enough. Some debts are not the kind that require acknowledgment to be real.

I sealed the letter and left it to post in the morning.

• • •

I went back to Narvik's harbour on a morning in late September, five months after the war ended.

The fishing fleet was in, the catch being unloaded with the organised noise of an industry that had resumed its rhythms. The smell was the same as I had described to Ingrid on the road down from the mountains — salt and cold, and the green undertone I had never found a more precise name for, the smell of the fjord in the morning before anything else was underway.

I stood at the edge of the wharf and let the smell be what it was.

Somewhere below the surface of the fjord, the wreckage of the Blücher lay distributed across the seabed, along with the equipment of five years of occupation — supplies and weapons and the material residue of a project that had run its course. Above it, Norway was reassembling itself. The process was not neat and was not without bitterness in places where bitterness had been earned. But it was underway.

I thought of what Dahl had said once, in the darkness outside a resistance cabin in the first autumn of occupation: that Norway endured. That the land was ours before there was

a Germany and would be ours after their flags were taken down. He had offered it as certainty, and I had received it as something between comfort and performance. Standing in the cleared dark outside a mountain cabin, I had not been sure whether he believed it entirely or whether he simply knew that I needed to hear it.

Standing at the edge of the harbour now, I found that the distinction had stopped mattering. The outcome was the same either way.

A voice called from somewhere along the wharf. Two fishermen arguing about the allocation of dock space, the particular grooves of a dispute that had clearly been ongoing for some time and would continue regardless of any external resolution. The ordinary business of a harbour reasserting itself.

I turned away from the water and walked back up through the town.

The street that ran from the harbour to the centre was the same street it had always been, and I had walked it several hundred times, and none of the previous times had felt like this one. The buildings to either side were familiar in the specific way of things you have not seen for a long time and assumed you remembered accurately and then found, when you stood in front of them, that you had remembered correctly after all. The post office. The ironmonger where my father had bought boat hardware for as long as I could remember, its window currently in the process of removing a German notice that had been fixed to the glass. The bakery that had operated under occupation with flour allocations and substitutions and whatever creativity

was available, and was now apparently operating with somewhat better flour, or at least flour that smelled better.

I walked slowly.

Past the café where I had sat in the early days after the liberation and listened to the broadcast of the King's return, surrounded by people I didn't know and the particular collective quiet of a room full of Norwegians receiving news they had been waiting five years to receive.

Past the church where Kristian's family had held a service in 1941, for the absence of him, after the word came through. I had not been there. I had been in the mountains, doing the next thing, and I had found out about the service months later through resistance channels. I stopped in front of the church for a moment. It had nothing to offer me now that I couldn't find in memory, but standing outside it felt like an acknowledgment of something I owed.

Past the street corner where, on a April morning five years earlier, I had heard the first distant sounds of German aircraft over the fjord and understood that the life I had been living was finished and a different one beginning.

I was twenty-nine years old. I had spent five years conducting a war in the only way available to me, had lost people I could not replace, had done things I would be a long time making sense of, and had come out the other side into a country that was still Norway — battered and beginning the long work of repair, but continuous with what it had been before the flags went up and the boots came down.

In my jacket pocket was a letter from Ingrid. She was in Oslo, enrolled at the university, living in a flat in Majorstuen

that she described with the same economy of expression she had brought to everything for five years. She was studying history. She was asking, carefully and without making it into more than the question it was, whether I had thought about Oslo.

I had thought about Oslo.

I had thought about a school in Frogner where they needed someone to teach languages. I had thought about the particular version of myself that had wanted to stand in front of a classroom and do something with words that built things rather than protected against them. I had thought about the fact that this person had survived the war, more or less, and was apparently still available.

And I had thought about Ingrid on a Tuesday morning in a flat three streets from mine, reading over coffee, and what it would mean to have the time to find out what we were for each other in conditions that permitted names.

The town climbed up the hill ahead of me, Narvik in September, the pale northern light lying across the rooftops the way it had lain across them since before anyone living could remember. The mountains above were the same mountains they had always been. The fjord behind me was the same fjord.

The war had made me. I would spend the rest of my life finding out what it had made.

I walked up through the town, toward home, in the pale northern light of a September morning, with the fjord at my back and the mountains above.

That seemed, for now, enough to be going on with.