

Gert Nygårdshaug

Eclipse in May

Cappelen Damm
May 2017

Translated from the Norwegian by Rosie Hedger

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In Holmestrand, spring was well on its way. The deciduous trees were green and lush, and a whole host of migratory birds had now arrived and were busying themselves in the bushes and undergrowth. For some, spring was a brutal set of jaws opening wide with insatiable, ravenous hunger. For others, the churning, overflowing rivers in spring were a symbol of the transitory nature of dry land. But not for Gudolv Gudvolden. He loved everything about spring, both its gentle and not-quite-so-gentle aspects.

He parked the car at the station, as he always did when travelling abroad. He stood on the platform for a while, enjoying the birdsong. Thrushes, chaffinches, starlings, tits. He always savoured the sounds of spring. No forewarning of death. Only new life, preparing to sprout forth. As if winter – all that which is dead and cold – had never been there at all. He hoped that the strawberry farmers in the region saw sense this spring and decided against shooting at the thrushes who took their share of the growing crops. They'd shot at them the previous year. Each of those thrushes had a family to feed. Each of those thrushes was a small piece of spring.

The train to Oslo was running on time. He stared out of the window as the train passed Sandvika, as was his habit. He was equally fascinated each and every time by the construction machinery and technology of which he had no knowledge, the way it sliced through metres of stone, revealing a shining, almost polished-looking surface within. Like here. Glossy, brown granite. Just on the right by the railway line, outside Sandvika station on the side of the track for the Oslo trains.

Gudolv Gudvolden knew the train times off by heart. As such, he knew that he had barely a twenty-minute wait at Oslo Central Station before the train to Gothenburg was due to leave. He bought a packet of jelly babies at the newsagents and bit the heads off four of different colours as he made his way to the platform where the train was waiting. He checked his ticket and found his seat, placed his small travel bag on the shelf above his head and removed the light-coloured coat he had been wearing over his suit. He opted for formal, anonymous attire on trips such as this one.

The train journey from Oslo to Gothenburg took just under four hours. He spent those hours reading through the documents one more time to ensure that everything was correct, that there was no room for the slightest uncertainty. That all three criteria were in place. This was a routine he followed on every occasion, but he had never come across anything that cast doubt on the decisions made by JUSTITIA ORG.

He arrived at Gothenburg Central Station at 16:50. At this point, there was a fifty-minute wait before the train to Malmö was due to leave. After scrunching up all of the documents asides from a few sheets, he discarded them in a rubbish bin outside Burger King in the station. There was a one in a million chance that someone would find and read them. Even if that *were* to happen, though, it made no difference.

He found a bench and took a seat. Pulled the latest Donald Duck comic strip from his travel bag and spent the next few minutes chuckling softly at Magica De Spell's foof bombs in the hunt for Scrooge's Number One Dime, and Gyro Gearloose's ill-considered invention of skis that wouldn't slide backwards when going uphill. Gudolv Gudvolden was thirty-two years old and was not a snobbish man of letters who thought himself too good to indulge in the occasional Donald Duck yarn. Carl Barks and Don Rosa.

He nodded off on the journey between Gothenburg and Malmö, and eagerly anticipated making his way to the sleeping compartment he'd booked on board the Stena Line ferry from Trelleborg to Sassnitz.

He slept through the entire ferry crossing and accepted a cup of coffee from the on-board catering service when they arrived in Jasmund in north-eastern Rügen. He showered, shaved and adjusted his tie, then put on a pair of horn-rimmed glasses with slightly tinted lenses and a wig. He stuffed the shoulders of his coat with padding he'd brought in a plastic bag inside his travel bag. The shoulders of a lumberjack. Checked that the false passport – the one that identified him as Oscar Svensson, issued by the chief of Norrbotten Police Department in Umeå – was tucked in his inside pocket.

His appearance was surprisingly similar to that of the person pictured in the passport. Even minus the spectacles and wig, for that matter. He knew that Oscar Svensson was a lumberjack in the forests of Boliden and that he had lost his passport on his first trip abroad to Gran Canaria. These were the few snippets of information that had come with the passport when it had been posted through his letterbox in Holmestrand just a few months earlier. He knew nothing about exactly which detours it had taken and how many hands it had passed through in that time. That didn't concern him. Trains travelling in Europe and within the Schengen region were rarely delayed by passport controls.

The train arrived at Berlin Hauptbahnhof just after six o'clock that morning. He spent an hour at a breakfast bar in the station, then spent a few hours wandering around and admiring the architecture and monuments in the famous Moabit remembrance park. The park was surrounded on three sides by five-metre-high walls. He found the reconstructed cell in which Albrecht Haushofer had composed his sonnets during the winter of 1944-45. Gudolv Gudvolden had personally had the pleasure of translating these sonnets into Norwegian. They were beautiful. Like a pair of tongs they snipped time in two, with the reader themselves required to do the snipping.

Haushofer was part of the group of German officers who agreed that Hitler needed to be removed from power, but following an unsuccessful assassination attempt in 1944, he went into hiding, and was later found and arrested. He was shot in the neck in the middle of Invalidenstrasse on the night of 23 April 1945. His brother had been the one to find his body.

Gudolv Gudvolden glanced at the sonnet that could still be read on the wall of the cell in which Haushofer had been held prisoner. The title was *Schuld*. Guilt. It had been written only a few days prior to Haushofer's execution. Gudolv Gudvolden recalled his own translation:

*I am guilty.
But not in the manner that you think.
I ought to have acknowledged my duty more quickly.
Even more so, I ought to have called evil by its name.
I waited too long to pass my judgement.
But I gave my warnings.
Though not sufficiently clearly.
And today I know where my guilt lies.*

He stood there for a long while studying the poem, moving his lips ever so slightly as he read through it several times. Then he left the solid walls of Moabit remembrance park with his gaze fixed on the ground in front of him. That was how it had to be.

He took the U-Bahn to DKB Deutsche Kreditbank AG on Kronenstrasse. The bank official nodded politely when Gudolv Gudvolden showed his passport and safe-deposit box verification, the latter of which had also been issued to Oscar Svensson. He was shown inside and the metal grate door was closed behind him. He fished out the key to the safe-deposit box. Inside the box, he found two things: a number of thick wads of Euro notes, and a Glock 17 semi-automatic handgun with a silencer.

The Glock 17 was a handy piece of kit, a smart little firearm measuring nineteen centimetres in length. It was extremely precise; a well-aimed shot could hit the head of a drawing pin from a distance of five metres. The bullets weighed seven grams and had an exit velocity of one thousand kilometres per hour. Seventeen shots in the magazine, hence the name. What's more, it was lightweight at under a kilo. The most important components were made of steel, the rest of plastic. Black polycarbonate, the kind used in expensive camera equipment. A solid piece of craftsmanship.

Gudolv Gudvolden was a highly-accomplished shot.

He gave a satisfied nod. Took the wads of pristine Euro notes and tucked them inside his bag. Checked the handgun's magazine was fully-loaded and slipped the weapon inside the back waistband of his trousers, concealed beneath his coat. Locked the safe-deposit box and left the vault. On the street outside, the sun was shining. He stood and gazed all around him until he spotted a rubbish bin, where he disposed of the key.

There were just two years left. This might be his last assignment in Berlin.

It was 11:48 when he took the U-Bahn to the area of terraced houses in Ruhleben, a rather exclusive residential area not far from Olympiastadion. His travel bag was slung over one shoulder. He'd taken the same route three times in the past few months. Reconnaissance. Checks. Nothing was left to chance. He knew what he was doing. Knew that between 12 o'clock and 1 o'clock in the afternoon, there tended not to be anyone to be seen in the residential area. Most were at work, with their children at nursery or school. Calm and quiet.

By 12:10 he had reached the lookout point, a small memorial plaque by a few lime trees located just behind a playpark. From there, he could see the green terraced houses with

their double garages. He knew that the car, a Mercedes A-class sedan, tended to be parked outside the garage until 14:00. At that point in time, the only person living in the house left in order to spend a few hours at his office in central Berlin. Gudolv Gudvolden had observed this pattern himself on the three separate occasions that he had been here, but it was also included in the brief, the selection of documents he had received. The car was where it was always parked today, too. Whatever was located behind the doors of the double garage was far outside his own sphere of interest.

There was no video surveillance on the street. Even if there had been, it wouldn't have made any real difference. The broad-shouldered man in a coat with dark hair and horn-rimmed spectacles, the man making his way towards the green terraced house with composed, determined strides, would be impossible to identify.

Gudolv Gudvolden pulled on a lightweight pair of gloves and walked up to the front door, where he placed his bag down by his feet. He had never come this close on previous trips. The door and frame had been fashioned from a combination of redwood, oak and brass. The elegant, painstakingly-crafted name plaque was also brass. He glanced at the name. Shook his head as his expression hardened. *You pig*, he thought to himself, pushing the doorbell with the index finger of his left hand as he pulled out his handgun with his right. He could hear the melodic chime of the doorbell from within.

Two minutes passed before he heard the sound of cautious footsteps. Another minute passed. Then the door opened. The man who partly emerged was holding the door ajar. He was dressed in an emerald green bathrobe with gold tassels at the waist, paired with matching slippers. After two seconds, the door was shoved open by the caller, who brusquely forced his way inside. The man stepped back into the porch; in the second that followed he was hit by two shots fired in quick succession, one directly to the right eye and the other at the top of his nose, just between his eyes. The first shot caused his eyeball to pop out, after which it landed on the porch wall, sticking to the fleur-de-lis patterned burgundy wallpaper and slowly sliding down the wall, leaving a slimy, dark-coloured stripe in its wake. The man fell back, where he lay motionless. He would likely remain there for a few days. Weeks, maybe. A man without close friends. The kind of man who no woman would choose to father her children, Gudolv Gudvolden thought to himself.

The whole thing was over and done with in just seven seconds. During those seconds, he peeled the eyeball from the wallpaper with the barrel of his gun and let it fall onto the carpet, then carefully closed the front door behind him without touching anything. Gudolv Gudvolden's work was tidy and efficient. He had also pulled a few stray hairs from the wig he was wearing, letting them fall to the floor below, ensuring that the police found some DNA traces from an unknown hair-donor to amuse themselves with.

He walked calmly along the pavement towards the entrance to the U-Bahn. Once there, he smiled and cheerfully acknowledged a mother pushing a pushchair before helping her down the stairs to the platform.

Back in the city centre, he located a different rubbish bin, where he concealed the gun and gloves beneath the litter inside. Afterwards, he entered the Michelberger Hotel on Warschauer Strasse, a five-star hotel where he'd booked a room. Before entering the hotel, he'd also removed his wig, tucked his horn-rimmed spectacles inside his suit pocket and neatly folded his spring coat, which he'd placed inside his travel bag.

Once in his room, he lay down on his bed and stared up at the ceiling for half an hour as he thought about the French author Alain Robbe-Grillet. In his universe, that which was

visible was invisible. The thoughts made him drowsy, so he quickly got back up, afraid of nodding off. He hadn't come to Berlin to sleep. He took a bottle of carbonated water from the minibar and stood by the window. No view, only a grey brick wall. He would soon visit Berlin Zoo, the high point of this trip. He had set aside the entire afternoon for the visit.

Now there he was again, in a large European city, a Berlin hotel room on this occasion; he sat there and studied the bubbles in the bottle and felt nothing. Should he? He felt no joy over what he'd done just a few hours earlier. Neither did he feel any shame or guilt. Occasionally he felt surprise at that fact. What he'd done was no more or less than an indifferent shrug.

Things had been different at the start. It was no longer a matter of feelings anymore, but possibly of a sense of justice that he'd never been part of, something that created a sense of balance in his existence. He carefully placed the bottle of water down on the windowsill to prevent the rest of the bubbles from disappearing.

Routine.

Considered from a particular viewpoint, certain emotionally-laden words and phrases – patriot, resistance, destruction, the fifth column, conflict, oppression, the individual, mistrust, rebellion, revolt, revolution, torture – held a certain significance, he thought to himself that afternoon. But he was in no such situation. He also doubted that any kind of universal context existed where the notion of justice could be employed in interpersonal relationships, not when viewed in the light of evolution. The same was true for the literature that he loved. There were too many different standards, too many ethical dogmas, moral absolutes and restrictions that transformed into ridiculous paradoxes when they collided. Too many Dostoyevskys, Murakamis and Márquezs.

Gudolv Gudvolden had been – and still was? – a victim of relationships in which his counterpart's lever tipped at both ends. He was all too aware of this fact. He knew it now, he recalled it every hour of the day. For that reason, he could feel neither guilt nor joy. He was free. Rather like Albrecht Haushofer must have been, in a way. *Keine Schuld*.

He sat down in one of the three comfortable armchairs the room had been furnished with. Took small sips from the water bottle. Sat there for a long while, pensive.

That was how it was.

He opened his travel bag and pulled out the two sheets of paper that remained of the pile of documents he had discarded in Gothenburg, the CVAM description. CVAM stood for *Curriculum Vitae Ante Mortem*. Every time that an assignment was completed, he made a habit of reading through the brief CVAM- résumé that came with each job, like a final purifying ritual before everything was erased, forgotten.

CVAM

Radan Tupolev – Carl Conrad Abelmann

Age: 63 years. Unmarried, no children, three short marriages behind him. Born and raised in Pustomazovo in Russia. Related to Andrei Tupolev (1888-1972), renowned aircraft designer and Soviet Union hero. Radan Tupolev qualified as an engineer and was given a leading position in the Russian oil industry, stationed for many years in Uraj, Siberia, the organisational hub for oil extraction in the north-west region. Former senior director of the Shaim Oil Field, one of the largest fields in Siberia, where conflict also arose with the native inhabitants, *ostyaks* and *voguls* who sustained themselves through reindeer herding. Radan Tupolev employed a paramilitary group to defend the oil field, but also dispatched the same

group to massacre the *ostyaks*; according to documents, seventy-three people were killed, fourteen of whom were women, and twenty-one of whom were children. In the subsequent investigation, it was recorded that eyewitnesses had seen Radan Tupolev sexually assault women and murder at least seven children with an ice pick. Events were hushed up by Soviet Russian politicians, both regional and central, and Radan Tupolev was permitted to retain his position of power. In the years that followed, however, central management executives for the Shaim Oil Field received increasing numbers of reports of Tupolev's brutality and violence, against both the local population and his own colleagues, and he was eventually removed from his position.

He emerges a number of years later as an entrepreneur heading up a company with responsibility for a larger extension of Grozny state prison in Chechnya. In this position, he was once again a suspect in the torture and death of prisoners, who he subjected to manual labour. Eventually his own staff refused to work under his brutal leadership. A secret state investigative committee concluded that Radan Tupolev ought not to be prosecuted or sentenced, given that this could negatively affect the reputation of his close relative of the same name. It was tacitly agreed that he was no longer considered a desirable Russian citizen, and he was essentially forced to leave the country. He agreed to leave after pressurising authorities into issuing him with a German passport and generous travel funds.

Radan Tupolev now lives in Berlin under a new name: Carl Conrad Abelmann. He has made his fortune by hiring cheap labour from Bulgaria and Romania, which he then hires out to German entrepreneurs. German authorities have also suspected his involvement in an extensive trafficking operation involving young women from the same countries. He has a small office in central Berlin, where he has spent a few hours each day over the past year. He is a regular evening guest in some of the city's least desirable nightclubs.

JUSTITIA ORG

He took the piece of paper into the bathroom, ripping it into tiny pieces that he then flushed down the toilet. Afterwards, he removed his shirt and tie and changed into a light green t-shirt. He stood for a moment in front of the mirror, but saw nothing new in his reflection: a lean but muscular frame, 1.85 metres in height, with dark-blond, slicked-back hair that was a little long at the back. Clean-cut, attractive, almost feminine facial features; the corners of his mouth naturally turned upwards and were framed by the slightest suggestion of laughter lines. His eyes were blue.

There had been several traces of anxiety in Gudolv Gudvolden's face over the past few years. Many of these had now faded.

Zoologischer Garten Berlin, also known as Zoo Berlin, was one of Berlin's tourist hotspots. With its 35 hectares, it was one of the country's largest zoos, and with around 14,000 animals, it was also home to the greatest array of species of any zoo in the world. Gudolv Gudvolden strolled through the gate just before three o'clock in the afternoon, quietly whistling an old hit, *Seemann*, which he had heard by chance as he'd passed a Bierstube with loudspeakers mounted on the wall outside.

On his way to the zoo, he had stopped at a newsagent's shop and had glanced at a German Donald Duck comic hanging in the window. They had Donald Duck in Germany.

Perhaps it was just a monthly publication. Germans weren't as keen on Donald as their Norwegian counterparts. He smiled to himself when he read the German name for the Beagle Boys, *Die Panzerknacker*. Uncle Scrooge was known as *Dagobert* and Gyro Gearloose was *Daniel Düsentrieb*, he knew those two. He wondered whether Donald had many adult readers in Germany; he strongly doubted it. There was something about Germans that didn't quite gel with the subtle humour of the world of Donald Duck. But perhaps he was mistaken. Perhaps German fathers and grandfathers revelled in the tales of Huey, Dewey and Louie, woodchucks in uniforms bedecked with medals. Donald's three nephews were called Tick, Trick and Track in German. There were no soft vowels here, only hard Cs and Ks.

Jawohl, he thought to himself, buying his ticket for the zoo. He was looking forward to seeing Knut again. This would be his third visit.

Gudolv Gudvolden didn't visit Berlin Zoo to look at monkeys or meerkats or parrots or tigers or crocodiles or jaguars or anacondas. He strode with purpose in the direction of his target: Knut. The bronze sculpture of Knut the polar bear cub. The small statue had been given the name *Knut der Träumer*, Knut the Dreamer, and had been created by the artist Josef Tabachnyk. It showed the small polar bear cub casually sprawled out on a rock, dreaming. As if entirely unaffected by the torments of the world, the planet's wretched, perilous voyage through an inhospitable cosmos, the earth's polar cap slowly melting with each passing year, making the existence of Knut and the fellow members of his genus increasingly unviable.

Knut was born into captivity in Berlin Zoo. He became all the world's pet after being rejected by his mother and reared by a zookeeper. One day in May just a few years ago, Knut died at the tender age of four. Witnesses said that one of his back legs started to tremble, to shake, then the young polar bear started vomiting and eventually toppled backwards into the pool of water in the enclosure where he lived. Dead. Veterinarians suggested he had suffered a stroke.

A while after events, the public were able to gaze upon Knut's fur, which was displayed on a sculpture made to scale. It was placed at the entrance to the zoo. Now this, along with the rest of Knut's remains, had been moved to the Berlin Museum of Natural History. Gudolv Gudvolden had been there once, but the visit had made very little impact on him.

He stood there for at least half an hour, gazing at Knut the Dreamer. He paid no heed to the people around him chatting and pointing, the children that ambled over to touch the sculpture. Some tried clambering onto it only to be pulled away and reprimanded by their parents. He stood there and felt a thumping in his chest. Powerful thuds. But were they thuds of pain? He didn't know. So he stood there. For a long time. Every single time. He tried not to think. If he managed not to think, perhaps the pure, untainted feelings within him would provide some kind of revelation, a glimpse of something unrecognisable to him. An answer as to why he was so drawn to the polar bear cub's sculpture whenever he visited Berlin. Why he couldn't leave the city without visiting it.

At seventeen minutes to five, Gudolv Gudvolden carefully nudged a family with small children to one side; Turkish, he noted. He met the man's gaze and they smiled politely to one another, after which he moved away from the sculpture. For the third time, he left Knut the dreamer behind without having received any answers. He didn't know if he'd have another opportunity to return to Berlin. He didn't know if he'd ever come to understand it. What the thudding in his chest meant. The thought of never seeing Knut again, it didn't trouble him overly, but it did leave him with a certain sense of unease. He stifled this unease and made for the exit, where he hailed a taxi.

He was hungry. He already knew where he would be eating that evening. He had reserved a table at *Bieberbau* on Durlacher Strasse a month earlier. One of Berlin's top

restaurants. Dining out at a top restaurant was a luxury he allowed himself once a year, upon the completion of an assignment. At half past five exactly, he was greeted with a bow by the head waiter, who politely showed him to his table.

As he savoured the restaurant's specialities over the course of the next two hours – a dozen oysters to start, followed by *Gepökeltes Durocschwein* with onions and blood orange, and *Gebratener Knurrhahn* with puy lentils, followed by various local cheeses and sweet desserts, and all washed down with the sommelier's splendid wine recommendations – the mystery of Knut the dreamer couldn't have been further from his mind. But this wasn't a permanent state of affairs, he knew that.

After a while, he fell into conversation with an older gentleman dining alone at a neighbouring table. The conversation – initiated by a sentence that this individual caught wind of, and which had escaped Gudolv Gudvolden's lips at the sight of a miniature masterpiece of a dessert – concerned the German author Thomas Mann's Brazilian genes. The author's mother had been Júlia da Silva-Bruhns, born on a sugar plantation in Brazil. She was known as Dodo. The words that had escaped Gudolv Gudvolden's lips were: '*Ach, du süsse Dodo.*'

'You're obviously familiar with Thomas Mann, then?' the individual at the neighbouring table mused, his fork paused in mid-air.

'I've had the pleasure of translating a few of his books,' Gudolv Gudvolden replied, his own fork hovering before him.

'Really? Then you must be well-acquainted with Mann's passion for sweet treats, I presume?' The man stroked his steel-grey beard and adjusted his gold-rimmed spectacles.

'Indeed I am.'

'He called all types of sweet delicacy *Dodo*.'

'Precisely. His mother's nickname. She was born on a sugar plantation, after all.'

'And was said to be rather a sweet woman.' Both men laughed.

The conversation continued throughout the remainder of their meal. The man at the neighbouring table was a retired university professor of literature and linguistics. He offered up several amusing stories from the lives of Thomas Mann and other well-known authors. Gudolv Gudvolden responded with a number of his own. On several occasions, the two men laughed so raucously at one another's stories that they received a stern look from the head waiter.

'Auf Wiedersehen.'

'Wiedersehen.' He paid, bowed to the head waiter and left the restaurant.

He went to bed early. The train to Kiel via Hamburg was due to leave at 08:15 the following morning. From Kiel, he had booked a ticket for the Color Line ferry to Oslo. Lying in his bed, he set to work on his latest pedantic translation assignment, a new translation of cult French author Alain Robbe-Grillet's work, an author who had penned several novels without any real plot. Novels in which the narrator had no name. Where the knife edge that separated life and death was non-existent. He didn't drop off until almost two o'clock in the morning, a smile on his face after allowing himself to become absorbed in the Frenchman's eminent work, as well as at the thought of the spring and summer that awaited him at home.

Two years left.

This was year eight.

Year eight of ten.

Haydir Temir ventured deeper into the narrow cave. He wiped the dribble from his chin, a result of having thrown up at the sight of the rats that charged forth, as well as having been forced to clamber over the mutilated corpses just inside the cave entrance. Or was it the fear of the last few minutes that had caused his stomach to reject its contents? Disfigured bodies, limbs hacked away. He was tormented by the thought of who was responsible. A fresh swarm of rats disappeared along the passageway to the left just up ahead. Another group scurried in the opposite direction, on the hunt for fresh meat. He hunched over and crept along behind those disappearing further inside. He couldn't turn back.

Because out there, more death awaited.

He glanced around in the dim light shining from behind. This cave must have been created by people, he thought to himself. He remembered what the mountain had looked like from the outside: like Erzurum cheese, with numerous bigger and smaller holes dotted all over it. The cave was too low for him to stand up inside, he was forced to crawl, creeping further and further inside. He carried on crawling and stumbled upon something that he thought at first to be dry twigs. But they weren't twigs. They were bones. He lay motionless and became aware of the fact that he was shaking. He found himself face-to-face with a skull. Several skulls, in fact. He counted six or seven before closing his eyes. The ground was littered with fragments of human skeletons; they filled the narrow passage. A jumble of bones in a heap.

Haydir Temir wailed in fear and crept half a metre back the way he'd come, closing his eyes and trying to control his trembling.

He forced himself to look. They must have been left here following a previous conflict. Had the *jandarma* been here before? In the faint light that reached him from the opening of the cave, he could tell from the bones of the pelvis that they had been men. The craniums had bullet holes at the temple. There were entry holes on one side and large exit holes on the other. Executions. He could see where rats had gnawed at the bones. The roof of the cave was too low here for him to crawl over the pile of bones. It was too narrow to allow him to navigate around the heap. If he was to make it any further, he'd have to push the bones aside. He closed his eyes and felt his tears welling up.

Behind him, from outside the cave, he heard screams. Followed by shots. More screams and more shots. *Someone out there knew that he was in here.* They'd seen him run inside. They'd wait for him. Keep watch by the entrance to the cave. The commanding officer would wait for days, months even, just to relish the experience of firing an entire round of ammunition into his body. He had to make it further into the cave and hope that there was another way out.

Haydir Temir was afraid; he was terrified.

He began creeping forward, metre by metre. The passageway changed direction, moving to the right and then to the left, and he realised that he had lost all sense of direction long ago. Fortunately there were no more bones along the way, but rats scuttled in both directions. He felt their small, wet paws and sharp claws as they scampered over his arms. Now the roof of the cave was barely half a metre high, becoming lower and lower still as he carried on ahead. He could sense himself losing his strength, his spark. He stopped crawling

and lay there, motionless. *There must be several ways out.* Unless he was lost.

In desperation, fear, infinite meaninglessness, he attempted to force the pain away, to recall something that reminded him of a life that existed outside of this situation. He wiped tears and slime from his face and laid his head down on the rough stone beneath him. Closed his eyes and wept in silence. Noticed the way that happy memories, each one more than ten years old, allowed themselves to be summoned from unknown depths within him, memories from days back when the world was simple and he was able to face evil with stealth, without conflict. For just a few seconds – seconds that he wished would last forever – memories flickered through Haydir Temir's exhausted mind. Clear, realistic, and full of light and joy. He was back at the chalk-white stable in the yard at home, in the little village square at the foot of the Taurus Mountains.

Flocking multitudes of birds came flapping through the light rain at daybreak like fuzzy balls of wool. They descended like sequins, floating down towards the earth and the barren fields that surrounded the village. Haydir was captivated by the droves that flew in from the mountains and forests that morning. There must be thousands of them, golden orioles with long, fine beaks, blue, red and yellow in colour. The cloudless sky was filled with specks, tiny birds that rose and fell before eventually landing amongst the stalks of grass and disappearing.

Haydir slung the worn-out satchel over his shoulder and set off on the long walk to school. It was more than four kilometres away, situated on the outskirts of the small village. He loved the walk. He loved it in the mornings when he made his way to school, and he loved it in the afternoons when he returned. When the flocks of birds finally settled, the night eventually faded and the light rain stopped. The distant mountains shuddered and steamed beneath the pale-yellow morning sky.

He hummed a little melody as he bounded from one dry patch of ground to the next, leaping between the puddles and deep cart ruts in the road. Haydir Temir had turned eleven three days earlier, and on his eleventh birthday, everyone in his class had sung this song to him. He had blushed. Hadn't dared to glance over at the rows of girls by the window. Hadn't dared to see if Güneli had been singing along with them. He was sure that she had been. But he knew all too well that there were two others in the class who hadn't been singing. Two sitting behind him, staring at the faintly flushed nape of his neck with scorn.

Güneli. The thought of Güneli revived his strength. He continued onwards into the darkness.

The roof became lower. The entire tunnel grew narrower. He pushed his arms out in front of him. It was so cramped that he couldn't pull them back. He crawled along a narrow, rocky channel with no idea where it might end. A billion tons of rock above his head.

He could no longer hear shots and screams. There was a damp, subdued silence inside the cave, interrupted only by the squeaking sounds made by rats crawling over him, some on their way back, others moving forwards, but where? His breathing was heavy, fatigue burning in every last one of his muscles. Dread, fear, he did his best to keep his sense of panic at bay. He lay on his stomach and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Gasp for air, forcing it in and out through his constricted airways. Then he continued his slow crawl, deeper into the nightmare.

You're going to die, Haydir, a voice inside him said. You're never going to see Güneli again. No! cried another, you're going to live! This isn't fair. He lay motionless once again. He remained there for some time, almost wedged between the roof and the floor of a cave that would soon be so narrow that rats alone would be capable of passing through it.

The walk to school. In the springtime, the fields were red and orange, filled with poppies in

full bloom. He had walked halfway home with Güneli almost every day. Güneli lived with her family by the edge of the fields and the pine forest. Güneli, whose body was so strange and lopsided, her shoulders slightly hunched, her throat like a misshapen tank. She was teased. Two of the boys in the class, sons of Kurali bey and Levat bey, two of the wealthiest men in the village, bothered her constantly. One of them, Azim, looked like Haydir, and people often mistook them for one another, which Azim couldn't stand. They believed that their fathers' wealth gave them the right to do as they pleased with anything and anyone. They thought, for instance, that they could chase after Güneli whilst brandishing sticks and shouting about how ugly they thought she was. But that had all come to a stop one day when Haydir had placed himself between the boys and Güneli. Haydir was well-built for an eleven-year-old. He had told them that if they didn't leave Güneli alone, the ongur birds would swoop down from the clifftops in the Taurus Mountains and peck out their eyeballs. What's more, he'd beat the two of them black and blue. Since they'd never heard of the ongur bird – a creature that was equally mysterious to Haydir, given that he had come up with the name quite out of the blue – and since the two bey sons were superstitious, as well as being afraid of being beaten black and blue, they stopped bothering Güneli. But one year on, Haydir had given Azim something to think about when he'd caught him spying on Güneli as she bathed in the small lake by the village. He had locked eyes with Güneli afterwards. He saw a depth and a warmth there that would smoulder in his heart forevermore. He had felt that way more than ten years ago, and he felt the same way now. He always would.

He must be at least a hundred metres inside the tunnel. The darkness was all-encompassing. He was aware of the panic that threatened to paralyse him between each scraping shuffle. The roof pressed down on his shoulders. It felt as if the mountain itself, its entire enormous mass, was attempting to squeeze the air out of him. He tried forcing himself through a gap that was far too small for him. His head was forced sideways; he swallowed hard to dispel his fears, to retain a sense of calm. A powerful heave helped him to make it a little further, but then he hit his head on hard rock directly in front of him. He felt around with his hands. Solid rock. The tunnel went no further.

Now he couldn't move at all. His upper body was stuck, as if in a vice, and he found himself unable to go back the way he'd come. He could only push himself onwards with his feet. He was completely paralysed, every fibre of his being, not a single muscle in his body capable of action. His chapped lips were bleeding, and his fingers, his hands, they were scraped up, the skin having peeled away. His throat was filled with dust, and he coughed violently. His coughing fit caused his head to hit the roof of the cave, and his face sank to the ground, his cheek hitting the grit below. He tried taking short, sharp breaths to prevent himself from screaming. If he were to start screaming now, it would drain him of the little that was left of his strength and willpower. If there even *was* anything left.

He lay still for a long while. The images, the memories from all those years ago, they were gone. He didn't want them at that moment in time, he suddenly realised. During his final moments, his final hours, perhaps his final days here, trapped in the mountain before perishing, before succumbing to thirst and hunger, before the rats started eating away at him, only then would he go over everything that had happened recently, particularly on that last day. Find a scrap of logic, a little spark of meaning in the situation he was in. Because there must be some logic to things, or he would simply die as an empty shell, entirely without substance, without significance. If he found some logic in his situation, something that could offer him some comfort, then he would conjure up those images from happier times in his final moments. Images of Güneli.

The thoughts marched through Haydir Temir's head, as rhythmic and ruthless as if Commander Tamak himself were issuing the orders. He had been a recruit in the paramilitary troop *Tamak Jandarmas* when it had been deployed on a mission to track down and kill the Kurdish rebel leader Hakan Gölicz, and to destroy his base in the mountains around the city of Hakkâri, located on the border with Iran and Iraq. He had only two months remaining as part of his compulsory Turkish military service – which he had hated from the start – when his unit was assigned this mission. He attempted to excuse himself. He wasn't built for long route marches with the aim of confronting an enemy. Numbers and equations, mathematics, these were his strengths, not AK-47s, cartridge belts, bayonets and grenades. It was no use. If he explicitly attempted to demonstrate his lack of willingness to enter armed conflict with an enemy he didn't know much about, he risked ending up in prison. Not to mention the fact that his service would be extended by a year. And that was the last thing that Haydir Temir wanted.

The fact that Commander Ilvan Tamak was a brutal bastard and a sadist was well-known among the troops. But nobody dared protest. The sense of discipline was as hard as nails, and the commander took advantage of any opportunity to humiliate, subjugate and torment the recruits until they lost all sense of wilfulness. Haydir himself had been forced to drink the commander's urine after hesitating to abseil down a twelve-metre-high vertical rock face without protection. He wasn't keen on suicidal physical escapades of that nature. He was keen on numbers and statistics. But in the army, the *jandarma*, Ilvan Tamak's troop, *everyone* was required to be a soldier, trained to kill and prepared to die. The commander had bellowed this at them on an almost daily basis. This is what they had been trained for, he roared, as they lay on their stomachs with their faces in the dirt, the commander pressing the heel of his boot to the backs of their necks and pushing them ever deeper into the mire.

Haydir Temir had wallowed in the dirt with the commander's boot pressed to the back of his neck on several occasions. He had counted the days. Just ninety left. Then eighty. Seventy. On the fifty-ninth day prior to his discharge, the order came: to the eastern mountain region to track down and wipe out an enemy.

Haydir Temir didn't know a great deal about politics. He barely even knew that his own country, Turkey, had enemies, or that these enemies were Kurds. The day before leaving, he had made his way to the commissariat and had asked to use a PC for a few minutes. He'd been allowed. He knew the steward; he had often helped him with calculations and costings relating to the troop's needs, spanning everything from woollen blankets and soap to tin plates and toothbrushes.

When it came to information on the enemy, the Kurdish leader Hakan Gölicz, he found several articles. He read a few of them. In broad terms, the articles outlined that the enemy was a breakaway group of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party. In the autumn of the previous year, Kurdish unrest had flared up in several small Turkish towns in the vicinity of the border city of Hakkâri. Fighting between the Turkish security forces and the Kurdish rebels had been widespread. The rebel leader had withdrawn to the mountains. Gone into hiding. They had been fighting for their freedom, as Haydir Temir understood it. For the right to their own language, their own culture, their own land. He wasn't in any position to judge whether this was fair or not. Wasn't everyone in Turkey a Turk?

Now he was going to be defeated. Commander Ilvan Tamak's troop was selected for the mission. Hakan Gölicz and his insurgents were to be eliminated. Ilvan Tamak's troop consisted of 24 soldiers carrying AK-47s, grenades, razor-sharp cutlasses and bayonets. And

Haydir Temir was to be one of the commander's bayonets. But he wasn't a bayonet. He never could be a bayonet. What's more, there wasn't a single Kurd in the world who had ever done him any harm.

No! he suddenly cried aloud inside the cave. The cry could have come from a suppressed airway, for there was no echo; the sound made by a sack of *pamuk*, cotton wool, as it fell to the ground. The sound didn't reach the heap of fresh corpses at the entrance to the cave; it was no more than a feeble breath of air against the rock wall in front of him. The only thing that he could hear was the sound of his own pulse as his blood pumped through the veins in his throat, it boomed so loudly that if he had been able to pull his hands to his body, he'd have clapped them firmly over his ears. But both hands were trapped in front of him in an impossible position. *Think, Haydir*, he ordered himself, *think, find some logic here, some meaning in what has happened!*

After several days spent marching through the barren, desolate mountain valleys, the scouts had located the small village in which the rebel leader was said to be hiding. Squeezed between steep mountain precipices were ten to fifteen houses, grey, primitive, built from rough, natural stone. Herds of goats grazed on the surrounding green hillside. Smoke rose from the chimneys of twelve of the houses. They could see women collecting water from a well. Throngs of children of all ages dressed in ragged clothing were playing together. Two old men were sitting on a bench, smoking. But there were no younger men with weapons slung over their shoulders and cartridge belts around their waists. No one keeping watch, no one even vaguely reminiscent of rebel leader Hakan Gölicz.

'We'll take them tonight,' Commander Ilvan Tamak had said. His eyes were as dead and flat as those of a sea bream. He unbuttoned his trousers, pulled them down to his ankles and squatted.

'What do you mean?' his second-in-command asked, doing the same. 'It looks like the village is completely drained of any manpower. There are no Kurdish rebel leaders here, nobody carrying any weapons, not according to our scouts.'

'Makes no fucking difference! We'll seize the scum before they slurp up their morning bowl of goats' eyes in yoghurt. Just before daybreak.' He groaned as he attempted to relieve himself. 'Deterrence. Those bastards will learn who the Turks are. Deterrence, my friend!'

Haydir Temir had overheard the conversation between the two leaders as they had relieved themselves behind a crag. He had seen the second-in-command sneer when Ilvan Tamak had mentioned the young women in the houses. He had realised that something awful was in the works.

It would all kick off at daybreak, just before sunrise. Until then, the troops would remain hidden in a small valley situated a kilometre away. There were steep cliffs and precipices. The inhospitable and awe-inspiring mountains towered over them with jagged tops. Wolves' teeth. But in the wolves' teeth, Haydir could see holes. A great number of holes. Someone had created caves leading inside the mountain. Exactly how those caves might prove useful was beyond the scope of his imagination at that moment in time.

It was equally beyond the scope of his imagination as he lay there, trapped, wedged inside the mountain and waiting to die. His carotid artery pulsated, his breathing was shallow and wheezy. He'd endured several bouts of coughing, and his lungs burned. The dust around him could well be toxic. Contaminated with rat faeces and bacteria. Even so, he managed to force a grimace, a smile in the darkness in spite of his anguished expression. Maybe there was some logic here after all, he thought to himself. Maybe what I did is enough to guarantee that I'll be allowed to die in peace? It had to be the case. He lay there in silence for a long while, his eyes closed.

The night had been cold and dark, but Haydir Temir had been sweating beneath his wool blanket, counting down the hours before daybreak. He tossed and turned, weighing up the arguments for and against. Traitor or saviour. Turncoat or hero. Enemy or friend. Guilty or innocent. Where were the lines between each of these? Who exactly decided?

Four hours before sunrise, he dragged himself out from under his wool blanket and started to crawl between his sleeping fellow soldiers. Quiet, careful. He left his weapon, cartridge belt and the rest of his clothing behind. He was wearing only trousers, shoes and his grey-brown shirt. He crept into the darkness until he knew that he was outside the camp, then stood up to work out his bearings.

Half an hour later, he was down by the houses in the village. It was dark, and there were no lights to be seen, but he followed the scent of smoke in the air. A dog started barking, cautiously at first, then more boisterously. Several dogs. A light came on in one of the houses. Several lights. A door opened. Several doors. He made his way towards one of the open doors as he kicked at the snapping dogs hanging at his trouser leg and held up his hands with his palms out in front of him to show that he came in peace. An elderly man carrying an old, single-barrelled shotgun took aim.

'Who are you?' His voice was wheezy and unclear.

'A friend.'

'What's a friend doing here in the middle of the night?' The shotgun was lowered.

Over the course of the next quarter of an hour, there was a flurry of activity: women and children flocked around him. With large, dark, fearful eyes, partially concealed by headscarves, they listened as he attempted to find the right words to explain. It took some time, but he managed. Eventually they understood. Children cried, but they were hushed, and the women wrapped the smallest of them in blankets and shawls.

'*Allah sizi korusun, teşekkür ederim, efendim,*' they called after him as he disappeared into the night; thank you, sir, may Allah protect you. He saw one of the old men – a man not yet entirely hunched over as a result of age and arthritis – lead the children and young people down a rocky ravine before they all disappeared into the darkness. He hoped that they'd find a hiding place with plenty of time to spare before daybreak, and that they'd keep well away from the village. Haydir Temir had found his way back to camp and had lain down there, the frost beneath his wool blanket causing him to shiver for the remaining two hours before the dawning of that terrible day.

Allah sizi korusun, teşekkür ederim, efendim. He could still hear the old man's words ringing in his ears as he lay there. But there was no Allah to protect him, no God, no supernatural power. The mountain that concealed him was no friend, it was slowly crushing him to death. Had he found any logic yet? Something that might allow him to close his eyes, to sink back, falling away to a peaceful death where the images of that happy time, of Güneli, could be conjured up once again? No, that gruesome day still separated them. Those images were sealed away. Haydir Temir forced himself to slow his breathing as his thoughts slowly swirled behind closed, swollen eyelids. Where no details were omitted.

At daybreak, Ilvan Tamak and his 24 armed *jandarmas* had stormed the tiny village, firing volleys at the doorways and rough, rocky walls of houses. Bullets ricocheted, whistling as they flew in every direction. One of them hit the second-in-command's knee, causing him to fall to the ground and thrash around. Most of the houses were empty. The commander seethed, swearing as he kicked down doors. Nevertheless, he found no small children's skulls to crush nor any young women to rape as part of his strategy of effective deterrence.

On the contrary, they found nine old folks, three men and six women, all of them so frail-looking that they could barely stand on their own two feet. Haydir Temir had met their gazes for a moment. Hardened expressions, empty stares, stoic, rueful appearances passed on from one generation of farmer to the next over thousands of years: *Sooner or later, autumn always yields.*

They were cruelly dragged from their homes. On the commander's orders, they were shoved, hauled, half-carried and pushed along a ridge for a few kilometres, towards a plain beneath a steep rock wall where there was also a cave. In his fury, the commander was desperate to enact some form of deterrence. As such, he single-handedly – with a little assistance from his two most trusted sergeants – chopped off the hands and feet of the nine elderly Kurds who had been pushed to the ground. There was not a single prayer, scream nor sound from any of them as they slowly bled to death. Afterwards, their body parts were tossed into the cave opening. Easily visible to the infidel dog and rebel leader Hakan Gölicz, should he pass by.

But Hakan Gölicz didn't pass by. Hakan Gölicz and his small army of armed Kurds had seen everything. The worst was only to become worse still.

Just before bullets had started to rain down upon them, as the morning sun cast an arc of pale rays of light down into the mountain pass and the silence between the mountains was all-encompassing following the commander's blood orgy, Haydir Temir had felt something he'd never felt before. It was an irrepressible rage, adrenaline stored up over days, weeks and months, and suddenly unleashed like a landslide that cascaded through his body as the commander's sergeants tossed the last mutilated body parts into the cave.

In that fraction of a second, he knew that he was signing his own death warrant as he approached Commander Ilvan Tamak and shoved the butt of his rifle into the commander's face with full force. Bone and cartilage crunched. Blood sprayed from the commander's nose and eyes as he sank to his knees. Haydir Temir didn't waste a moment standing still, instead making his way towards the cave entrance. He saw the commander stagger to his feet. He felt as cold as ice as he realised this would be the last step he ever took. He saw the commander point. Heard him shout, his voice thick:

'Shoot that dog!'

That was when it had all gone off: the volley of bullets crackled against the mountainside, but they weren't being fired from the weapons in the hands of the *jandarma*.

Not a single bullet hit Haydir Temir's back as he started running towards the cave. Even so, he saw several of his fellow soldiers fall to the ground, pierced by flying bullets. Just before he managed to duck inside the cave entrance, he saw the commander and sergeants seek shelter behind a few boulders. Everyone had shouted. Everyone had screamed. And the volley of bullets showed no signs of ceasing.

The images of the nightmare that had been the past few hours no longer caused him pain as he lay completely still deep inside the cave. Stuck. He was going to die. This mountain would never release him. He would find peace. He lay with his eyes closed. There *had* been some sense of logic, a deeper meaning. Now he was once again able to conjure up happier memories.

He saw the beautiful room where he had waited for Güneli. She had been eighteen, he had been nineteen, both students at the university in Istanbul. He studied mathematics while she studied pharmacy; she was the flower girl who, with her slightly sloping shoulders and slightly twisted neck, was so amused by all of Haydir's stories. Her eyes laughed, and they were eyes that he never tired of gazing into, becoming lost in. For him, the room could be nothing but Güneli. The floor was covered by woven kelim rugs, not a single inch left bare. It was clean and well kept, like an exotic garden transported from another world. Unknown, lavish, unavailable, uncommon, unreal, but not a dream, either; something in between night and day, greener than green, spilling over with hundreds of flowers in brilliant shades, as bright as freshly-polished copper on a misty spring morning that had been melted over the embers for a thousand years, pure and sparkling in its sumptuousness. Güneli was everything.

This was where the ceremony was to take place. They were to become man and wife. It was the most beautiful memory he possessed.

The room was large, adorned, filled with patterns from a forgotten world, a world as old as creation itself, and just as beautiful. At the same time, he could smell the scent of green pastures, spring and summer, autumn and winter, frost, snow, storms, rain and thunder, flowers, trees and forests, sea, rain, clouds, rivers. Pomegranate flowers, bougainvillea, rhododendron, waterlilies, hyacinths, deep pools filled with trout, scents, divine sunny days, darkness, clear night skies filled with stars, pitch-black, impenetrable, balmy nights. Bees, wasps, all gathering honey. Güneli was all of these things, everything that he was able to find in this room.

He sat there in his finest suit and waited for the moment to occur. Three years ago. The best memory Haydir Temir possessed.

He cried silently. How could a soldier, a *jandarma*, cry? He had never cried when the commander had forced his troop through mud and dirt, heat and cold, on endless route marches with stones filling their backpacks, nothing to eat for days on end. His feet had become giant, bleeding blisters inside his shoes. One quiet whimper, and his rucksack would be topped up with yet another stone. In this way, Commander Ilvan Tamak had eradicated any possibility for tears to be viewed as offering relief.

But now the tears came like short wails, whimpering sobs. He wanted to stop breathing. Maybe he'd die sooner that way. He emptied his lungs of every last trace of air that he could and saw red spots flickering beneath his eyelids. He noticed his body pulling away slightly from the rock around him. Without air in his lungs, his chest was smaller. He

managed to shift himself backwards a little. In order to push his weight in that direction, he had to empty his lungs completely and tense his shoulder muscles.

The tears, the sobs, they stopped. Haydir Temir gritted his teeth, exhaled, emptied his lungs of air, relaxed his arms and heaved himself a few centimetres back the way using the tips of his shoes. He pulled with his toes, his thumbs in front of him helping to shift his weight. He tried tensing his shoulders again, but they were stuck. He wriggled his hips from side to side, but could move no further back.

The rats must know that he was going to die. They rushed along from behind him. He could feel them at his feet. He kicked them away and could hear their squeaks, but still they returned. He felt their weight on his legs. They swarmed over him, burrowing their way around his shoulders, slipping beneath his armpits. He felt cold, sleek fur against his face as they forced their way past him. He felt their naked tails strike him as they passed. *Why did these creatures have to move further inside? Where were they going?*

A tiny spark of hope flickered in Haydir Temir's mind, he had to hold onto it, to fan the flames. He allowed the rats to scurry over one of his arms to try to figure out which direction they were moving in. They couldn't be running straight at the rock wall in front of him. They surged over him somewhere further in. He felt all around him, moving his hands cautiously. Felt the animals running to the left. Their small bodies created the sensation of movement in the air. Was it cooler? He could clearly feel a current, a faint breeze against the wounds and the sweat on his face.

The spark he felt hadn't been extinguished; instead it burned all the brighter. Once again he exhaled all of the air from his lungs and pushed as hard as he could towards the right-hand side of the tunnel. He managed to move an arm up in front of him on the left. Felt for the tunnel wall. He felt a gap.

And then he understood. He understood the rats' movements. He had crawled his way towards a spot where another cramped tunnel crossed the one he was stuck in. A new passageway extended at a right angle from the passageway he found himself in. A cramped, ninety-degree angle. He forced himself onwards as far as he could. He scraped his chin against the end wall in front of him and pushed his hips to the right. He reached his arms around the corner first, dragging his body along behind him.

The new passageway was just as cramped. The roof of the cave was no higher. Haydir Temir dragged himself along, wiping the blood and sweat from his forehead, panting, shaking and coughing, all as the rats pushed their way past him. The rock scraped his back and sides, but he could still feel the current of air, a faint breeze. People had created this tunnel, he could tell from the elongated notches on the ceiling, floors and walls. People who might have been smaller than he was, child slaves, perhaps, in some bygone era. *The tunnel had to lead somewhere.*

He crawled onwards. He noticed the passageway growing wider. Even so, it was still low, no more than a flat crevice in the mountain. He pulled himself further along. Ten metres, maybe, twenty, fifty, a hundred. He immediately felt the roof of the cave vanish, and the current of air grew stronger. He pulled himself up onto his knees and crawled forwards.

He felt the way his eyelids – heavy with dirt, sweat and blood – opened, the sudden sunlight causing his eyes to sting. Haydir Temir blinked for a long while before the contours of the landscape took on any kind of clarity. He was gazing out across a green plain where a herd of goats stood grazing.