



Panther Battalion

The Fortress of Evil

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Illustrated by Ida Skjelbakken

This story is inspired by real events in Norway during the Second World War. Some characters, weapons, and themes may be recognizable from the real war, but the story itself is fiction, which means it has been invented by the author. See the back of the book for factual information about the war.

A fully illustrated, full-color book.

The text is translated by Jenny Lund with help from AI



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Panther Battalion: The Fortress of Evil

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Chapter 1

November 1942

Petter threw the grenade and dived for cover behind a large rock. Hundreds of bullets whistled past his ears, stripping bark and leaves from the trees around him.

“The grenade missed!” Sara shouted. She was lying in cover behind a fallen tree a few meters away.

The faint drone of bomber planes sounded from the sky, explosions thundered in the distance, and tanks rolled through bushes and undergrowth. But worst of all, the great German evil himself, Adolf Hitler, was firing his machine gun from the hilltop!

“Sara!” Petter shouted, grabbing a knife from the ground. “Create a diversion so I can sneak up behind Hitler!”

“What kind of diversion?”

“Just run in the opposite direction, shout and scream!”

“But then he’ll shoot me!”

“It’s a small sacrifice for our country. One hero dead today, and three million can breathe freely tomorrow!”

Sara nodded firmly and took a deep breath, then stood up and ran, firing toward the hilltop and shouting, “For the King, Norway, and—”

Hitler swung the machine gun around and opened fire on her.

“Ra-ta-ta-ta-ta!”

Sara screamed in pain and sorrow as she fell.

Petter seized the moment and crept up the hill while Hitler chuckled and laughed at Sara still shaking on the ground from his bullets.

“Ra-ta-ta-ta-ta!”

Sara’s death screams sent a chill down Petter’s spine. Brave Sara, I will avenge you!

“Die, you Nazi pig!” Petter hurled himself at Hitler before the machine gun could swing back around.

“This is a knife,” he said, stabbing with the stick several times. “And now you’re stone dead!”



Petter raised his hands in triumph. “Norway is finally free. Comrades! Come out from the bushes and undergrowth. The enemy has been defeated once and for all!”

“Good grief!” said the dead Hitler, clutching his stomach and groaning. “Did you have to stab so hard?”

“With a villain like Hitler, you can’t take chances,” Petter said.

“Next time *you* can be Hitler.”

“Fine, but...” He sighed. “Then Norway is really in trouble.”

The school bell rang. The teacher waved it out the window.

“Damn it,” said Petter. “School’s starting.”

Sara came over as she brushed dirt and withered leaves off her dress.

“Can’t we play something other than war?” she said. “We could hopscotch or walk on stilts.”

“But this isn’t just play,” said Petter. “One day it will be our turn to defend the country. In the meantime, we can at least train.”

Sara rolled her eyes.

They walked toward the entrance of the school building.

“Uncle said a new student is starting today,” said Petter.

“Who?”

“The daughter of someone from the German army, that is, someone from the *enemy*.” He clenched his fists.

“Oh dear,” said Sara. “But she’s probably just twelve, like us.”

“Her father is a damn Nazi!” Petter slammed his fist against the stair railing, so it rattled.

“That’s not *her* fault,” said Sara. “You’re not planning to beat her up, are you?”

Petter thought about it. “No, I don’t hit girls.”

“You’re not allowed to anyway! Not by me, at least.” Sara sounded really angry. “Promise me you’ll try to be kind.”

Petter sighed, picked up his schoolbag lying by the door, and went inside.



But then he felt a hand yank hard on his shoulder. He turned and met Sara's intense, black eyes behind her round glasses.

"Petter Hansen!" she said. "Promise me you'll be nice to the new girl in class. Otherwise I'll *never* speak to you again!"

"Fine," he said. "I promise. But what if she's a Nazi, like her father and like our new teacher?"

"Anyone who has learned something bad," said Sara, "can also learn something good. Anyone can change their mind and change who they are."

"But they *invaded* us! Took our country! They're *born* evil, they get it with their mother's milk!"

"Oh yeah?" said Sara. "What about the Norwegian Vikings? They killed, robbed, and ravaged coastlines all over Europe. Does that mean *you're* a murderer and a thief?"

"That has nothing to do with *me*!" Petter rolled his eyes. "And that was a hundred thousand years ago! At least!"

"Quiet in the hallway!" the teacher said sternly. He smacked Petter on the head so hard his ear rang. "You're at school now! Behave yourselves. Go in and line up!"

Petter and Sara walked quietly into the classroom.

"And Petter?" the teacher said behind him. "The Viking Age ended only nine hundred years ago, so you'll have extra homework today."

Petter wanted to protest but clenched his teeth. It would only make the punishment worse. He trudged on toward his desk.

"Thanks for getting me into trouble," he whispered to Sara as he passed her seat.

"Not my fault you talk so loudly," Sara whispered back. "And my point was that just because you're born German doesn't mean you have to be mean."

"Her father's in the army, guaranteed Nazi!"

"Nothing is guaranteed, and she isn't him. Give her a chance."

"Okay, one chance," said Petter.

Sara stared at him sternly.

He placed his hand over his heart. "I swear on my mother."



She smiled and nodded.

Petter walked the last few steps to his seat. Like everyone else, he stood behind his desk and waited. The teacher was still out in the hallway talking to a girl he hadn't seen before—maybe the new student? She was tall, blond, and wearing a tie. That last part was strange; he'd never seen girls wear ties before.

They stopped talking. The girl came in and lined up behind the empty desk next to Sara.

Petter frowned and pondered. Maybe they really could become friends? There could be some advantages—she would be excellent at playing Hitler during recess, could probably shout things in German and stuff like that.

Petter glanced irritably at the classmate next to him, who was standing there picking his nose. That buffoon couldn't even defend a hilltop with a machine gun.

Okay... Petter decided to genuinely give the new girl a chance. If nothing else, she could be fun to play war with.

Chapter 2

The New Girl

“Sit down,” said the teacher.

Sara obediently sat down behind her desk with a small, aching knot in her stomach. The previous teacher had been arrested a week earlier, and the new one was much stricter. He wore a grey suit, and on the right side of his chest he had a pin with a swastika—meaning he was a member of Nasjonal Samling, the party for Norwegian Nazis.

Her mother had said that she must *never* speak to any of them, but how could she avoid it now?

She had also managed to forget his name. Her mind was completely blank, and Sara felt the knot in her stomach grow. The teacher had struck Petter with a ruler the day before, just because he whispered a little while they were doing their work. Forgetting his name had to be even worse!

And the new girl had sat down right next to her. What if Petter was right, and she was just as bad as the teacher...

Sara glanced sideways at her over the rim of her round glasses. She had blond hair in two long, tight braids, crystal-blue eyes, and she was tall—the tallest girl in the



class by far. She wore a clean white shirt with a black tie and a black skirt. Her clothes were not stained and worn like Sara's own.

Sara's dress had once been very pretty, green with embroidered white flowers. Her grandmother had made it, but that was a long time ago, and now it was not pretty at all.

"We have a new student in the class," said the teacher. "Her name is Hanna, and she is the daughter of the commandant—so treat her with respect!"

The teacher motioned for the new girl to come forward.

"Introduce yourself," he said.

Since the desk she shared with Sara stood at the front of the classroom, Hanna had to turn around to speak to the others.

"Ich heiße Hanna, und ..."

"Norwegian!" the teacher snapped. "You are in Norway now, and the children here do not understand German."

"Y-yes, sorry ..." The girl looked at the class again. "My name is Hanna, and from Germany I have come. I here with my mother and father had to move. My mother in Norway was born and Norwegian has taught me to speak."

"More or less," said the teacher.

Hanna rubbed her hands nervously together. "I-I hope friends we can become, and ... yes." She looked down at her hands.

"Thank you, Hanna. You may sit down."

The teacher picked up a piece of chalk, turned around, and began writing on the large blackboard. But he stopped in the middle of a word, lowered his arm, and looked back at the class with a furrowed brow and stern eyes.

"Remember what I said. Hanna is the daughter of the *commandant*. If any of you harass her, you will be sent straight to the fortress and must answer to him! Understood?"

"Yes, Mr. Løken," the children muttered as they took out their notebooks and pencils. Sara felt relief wash over her when she was reminded of his name. She drew a small onion¹ in the margin of her notebook as a memory aid.

The class sat for a while copying the sentences from the blackboard until the siren on the roof began to wail.

¹ "Løken" is a Norwegian surname that literally means "the onion".



The teacher put the chalk back on the ledge beneath the board and sighed heavily. "All right. Line up in rows in the hallway."

Sara showed Hanna that they had to stand next to each other in line.

"Those who sit together must also line up together," she said.

"Bomber planes?" Hanna asked, pointing upward. Sara nodded.

The teacher took his place at the front and led the rows marching in step behind him toward the bomb shelter in the school basement.

Chapter 3

The Bomb Shelter

"Don't be afraid," Sara said, taking Hanna's hand. "They always fly past. It's the big city they bomb—we're not important enough."

"You will be soon," said Hanna.

"Will we?"

"The fjord here is deep. Årvik will be an important harbor for submarines become."

"Oh no," said Sara. "So, then they might bomb us too?"

Hanna nodded. "Papa is building large bunker in the mountain beneath the fortress. The submarines can be safe there and refuel, get food. Prisoners from Trondheim have come to build even faster—Jews and such."

"Jews?" Sara looked at Hanna questioningly, but the lines stopped, and the German girl turned her attention to the teacher instead.

Mr. Løken opened the basement door with a key from his ring and waved everyone inside.

Sara walked over and sat down on the hard concrete floor with her back against the equally hard, grey concrete wall.

It always smelled in the basement, and it was damp and cold. Some old, broken desks and chairs lay scattered around together with other junk. Along one wall crates were stacked, filled with canned food, water, and warm blankets, in case they had to stay there for a long time.

She cast a frightened glance at the bucket in the corner. As long as the air-raid siren was sounding, no one was allowed to go out, not even to use the toilet. In the



worst case, they had to pee into the bucket while the teacher held a blanket around them so no one could see—but everyone could still *hear*.

Sara bit her lip. She immediately began to feel the urge to pee, as she always did when the air-raid siren went off. It was probably because she was so afraid of having to use the toilet here. Come on, Sara, think of something else!

Hanna sat down beside her, pulled her knees up to her chest, and smiled.

"So ..." said Sara, trying to think of something to talk about. "You said some of the prisoners are Jews?"

"Yes. They were on their way to Poland, but Papa asked to be allowed to use them to finish building the fortress and the bunker. Good that they can be used for something sensible."

"Are they *forced* to work?" Sara asked. "Like ... like slaves?"

"Yes, and when they are finished, the fortress will have new cells where they will live, and a large building where they will work making things we need for the war. Then they can be useful and not cause harm."

"Harm?" said Sara. "What do you mean?"

"The disgusting Jews, of course. They are the reason for the whole war."

"Hey!" said Petter, who was sitting nearby. "Jews are not disgusting! And they have nothing to do with the war!"

Sara smiled at Petter. They had been good friends since first grade. Of course he would defend her.

"Shh!" Hanna whispered, glancing fearfully toward the teacher. "You can't say things like that. Haven't you seen the posters?"

"No." Petter shook his head. "What posters?"

"In Berlin they are everywhere—about how the greedy Jews tricked us and our money took. Everyone hates them. Papa says they are *schaben*² and that they our people have poisoned. That's why he is in Norway—he is going to help you the Jews to get rid of."

A sharp pain stabbed Sara's stomach and tears pressed forward. She tried to force them back, but she couldn't. When she broke, she buried her face in her hands.

² vermin

"What's wrong?" Hanna asked.



But Sara only shook her head.

"You have to tell me," said Hanna. "Your friend I want to be."

"No," said Sara in a choked voice. "You *don't*."

"Yes," said Hanna.

"Her family is Jewish," said Petter. "And then you say such horrible things about them—you should be ashamed! Everything you said was a lie, and you should apologize."

Hanna stared at Sara with wide eyes and an open mouth.

"You!"

Sara nodded.

Hanna made a grimace and quickly shuffled away across the floor, as far from Sara and Petter as she could get.

Chapter 4 Under Attack

Hanna walked home from school along the cobblestone street. A motorcycle with a sidecar drove past. Apart from that, it was quiet and calm, very different from Berlin, where it was always lively with cars, trams, buses, and trains. In Årvik, people either cycled or walked, and the only cars she had seen belonged to soldiers from the fortress.

She flinched when a small stone slammed into the wall of the house beside her. Where had it come from?

Another stone grazed her shoulder, and Hanna caught sight of small shadows darting into hiding behind trees and trash cans farther down the street.

A sickening knot formed in Hanna's stomach. Were they throwing stones at *her*? Why? Because she was new? Because Papa was German? But he only wanted to help them, help their country become strong and good.

Another stone *shattered* the window just behind her. The loud crash made Hanna jump, and she became terribly frightened. She pressed the brown leather bag to her chest like a shield and closed her eyes. Then she heard footsteps running away. Perhaps the broken window had driven them off.



The door of the house opened, and an angry woman came out into the yard with a broom. She fixed her furious eyes on Hanna and hissed, “You little brat!”

“Nein! I-ich hab doch gar nichts geworfen! ³ Hanna said, but the angry woman raised the broom and ran toward her.

“Ah! Donnerwetter! ⁴” Hanna screamed as the woman struck her across the back.

Hanna grabbed her bag tightly, picked up speed, and ran away from the horrible woman as fast as she could.

A few street corners later, she had shaken her off and was able to slow down a little. She jogged down to the harbour and collapsed with her back against a large barrel.

She sat there gasping for breath until her strength returned. But at the same time as her breathing began to slow, tears welled up in her eyes.

Verdammt! ⁵ She had completely forgotten to speak Norwegian...not that it would have stopped the angry woman. There was no one else there when the door opened, so of course Hanna was blamed.

Oh, what a *terrible* day! Hanna sniffed and closed her eyes.

She was never going to make any friends here; everyone hated her. At least Sara ... and the two of them were going to sit together for the rest of the year. She would be alone every day. Would they keep throwing stones at her? Would they hit her? Maybe the next stone would hit her head so hard that she fainted and ...

Hanna opened her eyes and stared at the lapping water around the bobbing fishing boats in the harbour.

Yes, maybe she would stagger helplessly toward the edge and fall off the quay. Straight into the water with a bump on her head and sink to the bottom. And there, as she drowned among seaweed and kelp, the crabs would come to eat ...

Hanna shook away the horrible thoughts. She looked toward the fortress, her new home. There it stood, proud and impressive, with massive, smooth stone walls gleaming in the sunlight and manned watchtowers at every corner.

It lay on a rise, right at the edge of a cliff. You could actually dive from one of the towers and hit the water more than fifty meters below, but that would surely be dangerous.



From that tower, the soldiers had a view of both the fjord and the harbour where she sat. The fortress was the highest point in Årvik, and she loved standing in the tower when the sun set on the horizon; the water always shimmered so magically.

Beneath the fortress, with an entrance from the sea, was a large concrete cave—a *bunker*. She could see the entrance from where she sat. A submarine was already moored inside, and tomorrow another one would arrive, with important guests from Berlin.

³I-I didn't throw anything!"

⁴ Good heavens!

⁵ Damn it!

It was safe in the bunker, deep inside the mountain, beneath meter upon meter of solid stone and concrete, well protected from British bombers. From the fortress, the submarines could take on supplies—fuel, provisions, and torpedoes—before setting off again toward new adventures at sea.

Hanna sighed. She wished Papa had never become commander in awful Årvik. Mama had said that all children in Norway were kind and good. But that wasn't true, or maybe all the kind ones had grown up and only had mean children.

She missed Berlin. The longing for her hometown clenched her heart every hour, every minute, every second.

Hanna stood up, sniffed, and trudged the last stretch home.

Chapter 5

Dinner with Papa

“Papa?” Hanna asked at the dinner table. “Darf ich etwas fragen?”⁶

Her father lowered the newspaper and looked at her over the edge of the paper. “Yes but speak Norwegian. We both need practice.”

“You’re doing very well,” her mother said with a warm smile as she set the pot of boiled potatoes on the table and went to fetch something else.

“Papa . . .” Hanna poked at the fish lying lukewarm and lifeless on her plate with her fork.



“Yes?” her father said, folding the newspaper completely. “Is someone bothering you? Are they teasing you at school because you are German? I’ll put a stop to that quickly!”

“No,” Hanna said, thinking of the ones who had thrown stones. She hadn’t seen who they were anyway, and they had missed.

“You have said that the Jews bad are.”

“Yes, of course!”

“But there is a girl in my class who Jewish is, and she seems kind and nice. We sit together, and I was wondering if it is all right for me with her to play?”

Her father stared at her with his black, hard eyes, which grew more and more narrower.

“No,” he said. “That is *not* all right.”

“But Papa, I have all day at school at her spied, and she seems kind and—”

“No!” her father roared, slamming his fist on the table so that the cutlery and glasses rattled.

Hanna was so shocked that she didn’t know what to say.

“What is this girl’s name?” her father asked.

Hanna bit her lip. She didn’t quite know why, but she felt she shouldn’t say it.

⁶ May I ask something?”

“Wie heißt sie!”⁷ he thundered, leaning across the table toward her.

“S-Sara,” Hanna managed to whisper.

“Danke schön.”⁸ Her father leaned back in his chair and looked down at his plate. He picked up his knife and fork and began cutting the fish into small pieces.

⁷ What is her name!

⁸ Thank you.

Chapter 6

The Soldiers

“Hi!” Petter shouted, waving to the new girl in their class.

Hanna turned and looked at him with wide eyes; she almost looked frightened.



“We can walk together the last stretch to school,” he said. “So, what’s going on in Germany? Is there a lot of war there?”

“The British are dropping bombs,” Hanna said. “But Papa says we will win the war.”

“Ha!” said Petter. “My dad says Germany doesn’t stand a chance, especially now that the United States has joined our side.”

“Our side?” Hanna asked. She looked confused.

“Oh, I mean …” Petter scratched his head. “Never mind. But have you seen any *tanks*? I’ve always wanted to see a real tank. I haven’t seen any here in Årvik, though my uncle says they have one at the fortress.”

“Yes,” said Hanna. “We have a Panzer at the fortress.”

“We?” said Petter. “Do you mean you *live* inside the fortress?”

“Yes. We have our own house there, and I have my own bedroom.”

“Cool,” said Petter. “Especially that you’ve seen a real tank. I’ve always wanted to drive one. Could I come visit after school and see it?”

Hanna smiled and nodded.

“Thanks,” he said. “When I grow up, I’m going to be a soldier, drive a tank, and protect Norway!”

“Against the Jews?” Hanna said.

“Uh … well …” Petter stopped and took a breath. “What’s going on over there? Isn’t that where Sara lives?”

“I don’t know,” Hanna said.

“No, of course not … Come on!”

Petter ran over to the truck parked in front of Sara’s house. The cargo bed was covered with a large green tarpaulin. It looked like a square tent.

He peeked into the opening at the back. Four German soldiers were sitting inside with weapons, staring back at him. Petter jumped and hurried on together with Hanna.

“There are *soldiers* in the truck,” he whispered to her. “What are they doing here?”

Then he heard a loud bang from the house, like a pistol shot, and a piercing scream cut through the air.

“What the hell!” Petter exclaimed. He pulled Hanna behind a couple of large trash bins and spied through the gap between them.

A couple of the soldiers jumped down from the truck bed and looked up and down the street, but they didn’t seem worried, despite the sound of a gunshot. Were they looking for him, maybe? Because he had looked into the truck?

Then a German soldier came out of the house, dragging a woman by the hair!

The other soldiers went to help him. She twisted and struggled, but they grabbed her arms and held her still. Her long white skirt was covered in *red stains*. Could it be … blood?

“That’s Sara’s mother,” Petter whispered to Hanna.



A shirtless man came running out of the house. He tried to pull on his trousers as he ran. He stumbled, fell, but got up again and kept running.

“And that’s her father,” Petter whispered. “He’s a night watchman and usually sleeps at this time.”

One of the soldiers shouted something in German, and the father stopped short. His hair was wild, and his eyes wide open with fear.

Petter didn’t understand German, so what they were talking about was a mystery. One of the soldiers pulled a pistol from its holster on his belt and aimed it at Sara’s mother’s head!

Chapter 7

The Horrible Thing

“Oh God …” Petter muttered. His body turned cold, his heart pounded. He should close his eyes or look away, but he couldn’t.

“No!” Sara’s father shouted. He let go of his trousers and raised his trembling hands. He just stood there in his underwear, tears streaming down his cheeks, until two German soldiers came and took him away. Both parents were pushed into the truck and driven off.

“What could that be about?” Petter said, relieved that no one had been shot.

“Maybe they stole something?” Hanna suggested. “They are Jews, aren’t they?”

Petter gave her a stern look.

“You have to stop talking like that!” he said harshly. “Once I can forgive, but if you keep it up, I’m going to hit you!”

“B-but I’m the commandant’s daughter,” Hanna said. “He’s going to—”

“I don’t give a damn!” Petter said.

They stared at each other for a moment until she lowered her gaze.

“Sara and I are friends,” he said. “And neither she nor her family are thieves, *understood?*”

“Yes,” Hanna said. “… Petter, was it you who stones at me yesterday threw?”

“… No.”

“You’re lying,” she said. “I can see it.”

“I’m *not* lying,” Petter said. He felt a stab of guilt. “But the other boys asked if I wanted to join them, so I knew what they were planning. I said no, that’s true, but I didn’t do anything to stop them either.”

“Why?”

“Because of what you said about the Jews, about Sara’s family.”

“I mean, why did you say no?”

“Oh, this is going to sound strange, but it was because I made a promise to Sara.”

“Sara?”

“She said I had to give you a chance, be kind and decent.”



“Did she really say that?” Hanna’s eyes widened. “But …” She looked back at Sara’s house. “Would she really my friend want to be?”

“Maybe then, but probably not anymore, not after your father *arrested* her parents. Now she probably hates you.”

“Maybe there was a good reason?” Hanna said in a weak voice, as if she didn’t quite believe it herself.

“Do you really think so?” Petter said, shaking his head.

“C-can we just to school now go?”

“Sara has a grandmother who lives at home,” he said. “We have to go and see if she’s okay.”

“Then we’ll be late for school.”

“So be it,” Petter said and walked toward the house with determined steps. “You can go if you’re afraid of getting scolded, but I’m going to check how Ruth is first. She must be terrified after what just happened.”

“All right,” Hanna said, following him. “We can a quick look take.”

Petter went over to the door and saw that it was hanging crookedly, on just one hinge. The lock had been blown open. They must have refused to let the soldiers in. Maybe that was why they had been arrested?

He pushed the door open and peered into the dark hallway.

“Ruth?” he called. But no one answered.

“Maybe they took her too?” Hanna suggested. “Before we got here.”

“She’s eighty years old and stubborn as a mule. I doubt they’d manage to move her. In the morning, she usually sits in the kitchen looking out the window. They have a bird feeder outside, and she’s more interested in bullfinches than most.”

“Typical Jews to have so much food they on birds can throw it away,” Hanna said.

“Are you completely stupid or what?” Petter shook his head. “Sara’s parents are poor, just like the rest of us.”

Hanna fell silent.

“And a few crumbs for the birds can always—” Petter pushed open the kitchen door, gasped, and fell silent.

There lay Sara’s grandmother on the floor, in a pool of blood!

Chapter 8

Where Is Sara?

Petter felt sick. He barely managed to stagger out of the house before he threw up. His eyes watered and he felt dizzy.

Hanna stood some distance away, her face completely pale. She fumbled with one of her long braids, stroking it as if it were a little puppy or kitten.

“They *shot* her!” Petter shouted. “*Why?*”



Hanna said nothing.

“Your father is their boss, isn’t he?”

“I-it wasn’t Papa’s fault,” Hanna said, but her voice was weak and on the verge of breaking.

“Oh, no? Do you think soldiers just go around shooting people without their boss being in on it?”

“But …” Hanna shook her head sadly.

“Why?” Petter said. “What could an eighty-year-old grandmother have done to deserve to die!”

“She was …” Hanna bit her lip.

“Yeah, exactly. She was a *Jew*, wasn’t she?” Petter said. “And they’re worth nothing? They’re thieves—wasn’t that what you said?”

Hanna nodded.

Petter ran up to her, raised his fist, and swung!

But he stopped it right in front of her face. She hadn’t tried to defend herself. She hadn’t stepped back or raised her hands. She had only closed her eyes and stood still. Waiting.

Petter let his hand drop.

“What’s the point of being angry with you?” he said. “It isn’t your fault. Not really.”

“Maybe a little …,” she said.

“What?”

A tear ran down Hanna’s cheek.

“I-I told Papa that a girl in my class Jewish is.”

Petter shook his head. “So what? That’s no reason to shoot her grandmother!”

Hanna just stood there, staring down at her shoes.

“Imagine hating someone that much,” Petter said, “just because they were born Jewish, just like …” He felt his chest tighten. “Sara!”

He took off down the street as fast as he could. His feet hammered on the cobblestones. Sara wasn’t at home, so she must already have gone to school. He flung the big schoolbag into the ditch, tore around one corner, swung around the next, and there … the same truck! It was parked right outside the school building. One of the German soldiers stood guard by the tarpaulin.



He ran toward him, had to get past the guard and look under the canvas, see if she was in there, if they had taken her, or if she had managed to escape.

But before he got that far, he saw her. She came out of the school door with a soldier on each side. Her face was pale, her eyes frightened.

Petter clenched his teeth and sprinted even faster, straight at them! He *had to* save her, had to do *something*—but what? Maybe shove the soldiers away, grab her hand, run and hide her under hay in a barn?

He crashed his shoulder into one soldier and kicked the other in the knee. He grabbed Sara's hand and pulled her with him.

Out of the corner of his eye he barely caught sight of the butt of a rifle before it slammed into his head, and everything went black.

Chapter 9

A Shared Battle Plan

Petter opened his eyes. The light stabbed at them, and his head throbbed. The pain made him lift a hand and feel the places where it hurt the most. A bandage was wrapped around his head over his ears and forehead. He could feel the hint of a lump beneath it.

Okay, that had been really stupid—but what else was he supposed to do? Applaud the soldiers? Wish Sara a pleasant trip to prison?

He sat up and blinked. The light hurt a little less once he got used to it. But ... where was he? What had happened to the soldiers and Sara? He was in an unfamiliar room, lying in a bed, but without a blanket and still fully dressed. A window was ajar, and he could hear raindrops pattering against the leaves of the tree outside.

“Guten Morgen °,” a girl's voice said.

He turned his head, which sent a thousand needles stabbing behind the bandage.

“Ow ...,” he groaned, but he managed to see who it was. Hanna, the new girl in their class. She sat on a stool beside the bed.

“What are *you* doing here?” he asked.

She didn't answer, just shrugged.

“Where is Sara?”

“She is with her parents at the fortress.”



“And what are they doing there?”

“Papa says all the Jews in Årvik there must live, before they to Poland go.”

“And what happens when they get to Poland?”

Hanna shrugged.

“The same as what happened to her grandmother?”

“Papa would never ...”

“He already has!” Petter cut in. “And *you* reported her!”

Hanna closed her eyes, but Petter could see her lower lip tremble.

“Okay,” he said. “I don’t think you meant for it to turn out like this, but ...”

He tried to think. What now?

“I ... I have to save her,” he said. “What about you? What do you actually think of Sara?”

“I-I only wanted her friend to be.”

“Good. You saw what happened to her grandmother, didn’t you? Do you understand that Sara could be in great danger?”

Hanna nodded.

“And if I try to save her, will you help me? Or are you going to run and tell your father?”

“I won’t tell,” she said firmly, looking him straight in the eye. “Ich schwöre auf meine Mutter!”

“What does that mean?”

“I swear on my mother.”

⁹ Good morning

“Okay.” Petter nodded. “That’s good enough.”

“But you can’t do it,” Hanna said. “The fortress is guarded by soldiers.”

Petter noticed her eyes were a little red, as if she had been crying for a long time. But it couldn’t be because of him—they barely knew each other ... Could it be because she felt guilty about what had happened to Sara? Then she might help him after all. It was a chance he had to take, but he had no choice.

“You live inside the fortress,” Petter said. “You said so earlier today.”

“Yes, yesterday,” Hanna said. “You have slept a long time. It is Saturday now.”



“What? But … why hasn’t Dad come to get me?”

“He will come later.”

“That wasn’t an answer!”

“You attacked soldiers, so they must with your family talk.”

“Why talk to *them*? It was me who—”

“They think that your mother and father Germans do not like.”

Petter groaned and lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. What an *idiot* he had been! Attacking German soldiers would obviously raise suspicion. And they were completely right. Mom and Dad *hated* the Germans, like most people in Årvik. His uncle had even smuggled Jews and resistance fighters over to Sweden.

A nasty thought popped into his head.

“You told your father that Sara was Jewish, but it was me who told you that, wasn’t it? Back in the bomb shelter.”

Hanna didn’t answer. She just looked down at her hands in her lap.

Petter groaned—both from the pain in his head and from what a *total, complete idiot* he had been. Typical of him: never thinking ahead, never thinking about what could happen, just blurting out top-secret information straight to the enemy!

He studied Hanna. Was *she* the enemy? But she was only twelve, like him, and she seemed genuinely sorry.

“Hanna,” he said. She looked up at him. “If I manage to save Sara, I know someone who can get her safely to Sweden.”

“Good that will be,” she said. “But how do we free her from the fortress?”

Yeah, exactly—that was the riddle … how?

“You are the commandant’s daughter,” Petter said, “so you can go straight into the fortress, right?”

“Natürlich. ¹⁰”

“And your father wants you to make friends, doesn’t he? What could be more natural than inviting a new friend from class to come home with you?”

Hanna thought for a moment and nodded. “Yes, I can tell the guards that you a classmate visiting are. But even if inside you get, there is little there you can do.”

“Oh, I’ll come up with something once I’m there,” Petter said. “Just get me in, and I’ll handle the rest. Where are we now, by the way?”



“This is teacher’s home, second floor of the school. You will here rest until you are picked up.”

“Forget resting!” Petter swung his legs down to the floor. “We sneak out now, right away. I have a friend to save, and nothing is more important than that!”

“But you got a blow to the head, maybe injury?”

“Pah, I’ve shaken off harder hits than that. Come on!”

Petter stood up—slightly dizzy, but otherwise okay. The room had a door and a window. He went to the door and listened. There were voices on the other side, probably guards.

He went to the window and swung it wide open.

The rain had stopped, and there was even a bit of sun shining through cracks in the dark clouds. They were on the second floor, but there was a tree right there. He climbed onto the windowsill, took a breath, and threw himself down toward a thick branch. He clung to the wet bark as the branch dipped up and down from the impact. A shower of drops broke loose from the leaves and rained down on him.

Then he lowered himself until he was hanging by his arms, let go, and landed heavily in the wet grass. It stung in his legs, but otherwise he was fine. He looked up at the window.

“Hanna?” he whispered as loudly as he dared. “Your turn.”

The window was empty, and no one answered.

“Hanna?” He whispered a little louder. Had she betrayed him already?

¹⁰ Of course

Then the building’s door opened. Petter expected furious German soldiers with loaded rifles, but it was only Hanna running out.

“I said I was going home, and that you would sleep,” she said. “I did not want to myself out into death throw.”

Petter looked up at the second-floor window.

“It was only a few meters.”

“Death,” she said firmly.

“Fine, but now we have to get to the fortress as fast as we can. Sooner or later, they’ll discover I’m gone and raise the alarm.”



Chapter 10

Into the Lion's Den

“Guten Morgen, Hanna,¹¹” said the German soldier standing guard at the barrier in front of the fortress.

“Guten Morgen, Franz,” she replied, curtseying and giving Petter a nervous sidelong glance.

“Und wer ist das? ¹²” The soldier pointed at him.

Petter felt cold run down his spine as the man studied him from head to toe with hard, suspicious eyes.

“Es ist ein Freund aus der Klasse,¹³” Hanna said. “Er wollte mich besuchen.¹⁴”

The hard grey eyes studied Petter for a few more seconds before the guard turned and ducked into a small building beside the barrier.

He came out again quickly with a ring binder in his hand. He opened it and flipped to the right page. Even upside down, Petter could see it was a list of the students in their class.

“Wie heißt er? ¹⁵” the guard asked.

¹¹ Good Morning, Hanna

¹² And who is that?

¹³ It's a friend from school.

¹⁴ He wanted to visit me.

¹⁵ What is his name?

“Petter,” Hanna answered.

“Familienname?”

“He wants to know your last name,” Hanna said.

“Hansen,” Petter said as casually as he could. He even began to whistle a little tune to seem extra innocent.

The guard ran a finger down the list and nodded.



“Hansen, Petter—ja, das stimmt,¹⁶” he said. “Augenblick mal.¹⁷” The guard went back into the building. There he lifted the black receiver from a telephone box in the wall and began speaking German.

“He is talking to my father,” Hanna said. “Just checking if it is okay that I bring a boy from class inside.”

“Okay,” Petter said.

At last, the guard put the receiver back and came out again. He nodded at them and opened the barrier. Which was rather unnecessary—it was only meant to stop vehicles, so the two of them could easily have walked around it—but maybe it was done symbolically, to show they were welcome.

A grim thought surfaced in Petter’s mind: even if he managed to find Sara and set her free, how was he going to get her out of here? The guard at the barrier would stop them, and he had something that looked like an Sturmgewehr 44—an automatic rifle.

They crossed a large open area laid out like a square and enclosed by a high, thick stone wall. The ground was hard and dusty. In each corner of the wall, watchtowers had been built. Guards stood in all four, with binoculars and rifles. The red, black, and white Nazi flag fluttered in the wind from the top of a tall flagpole. There were six large buildings in the yard—two houses, some barracks, an outhouse, and a few sheds. Petter could see crates stacked in small pyramids, a couple of cars, the truck from earlier, and ... Petter gasped.

“Awesome!” he blurted, running over to the large tank standing by itself in the middle of an open space.

¹⁶ That’s right.

¹⁷ One moment.

“A *Panther!*” he said, grinning at Hanna. He ran his hand along the hull. “At its thickest, the front armour is 140 millimeters thick. *Nothing* gets through that. The fuel tank holds 730 liters. It weighs 45 tons, and the cannon is perfectly calibrated to stop other tanks. In Dad’s military magazines it says it’s the best tank ever made! It’s supposed to be used on the Eastern Front against the Russians’ T-34s—I didn’t think there were any in Norway.”



“Uh-huh,” Hanna said. “But what are we going to do now?”

“Can I see inside?”

“No. Then the guards you will shoot.”

“Too bad.” Petter stared longingly at the great machine and gave it one last pat. “It isn’t that important anyway. What matters is saving Sara. Where is she?”

“The prisoners usually work during the day,” she said. “But they will get soup soon, and then they are in the cells eating.”

“Okay—where are the cells?”

Hanna pointed to one of the buildings, and Petter sighed heavily.

It was a tall building with three floors, and there were two German guards with rifles outside the door.

“Can you take me in there?” he asked. “It should be okay, since you’re the commandant’s daughter, right?”

“No,” she said. “Not even I can go in there. No civilians are allowed.”

There *has to* be a way in,” Petter said. “Maybe an open window?”

Hanna shook her head.

“We’ll have to walk around, look and think,” he said.

They took a walk around the building with the cells. Then Petter understood why Hanna had shaken her head so firmly. All the windows had bars—vertical iron rods. The third floor didn’t even have windows, just bare walls and ...

“Aha!” Petter said, pointing up at a small square. “A vent! There aren’t any guards up there.”

Hanna looked up and shook her head.

“No,” she said. “There is surely a grille inside as well.”

In a vent? No. At worst they’ve only screwed in a plate with slats. I can easily remove a plate like that with a screwdriver, and the opening is just barely big enough for us to crawl through.”

“High up on the wall it is,” Hanna said, studying the top of the building. “Three floors. Will you ladder use? We not such a tall ladder have.”

The building next to it is only a few meters away, and it has a window on the same floor. Can you get us in there?”

“Yes. That is where I live, with Mama and Papa.”



“Okay! Then we have a plan!” Petter smiled slyly. “We go into your house, find a third-floor window, throw a rope over to the other building, climb across, unscrew the plate, and crawl in. Then we find Sara and get out.”

“You are crazy,” Hanna said.

I need a rope with a hook, gloves, and a selection of screwdrivers—nothing else.”

“Screwdrivers, gloves, and rope, yes, that is easy to find,” Hanna said. “But a hook ...”

“Do you eat meat sometimes?”

Hanna nodded.

“When they get the animal—maybe a pig from a nearby farm—they have to hang it on a hook after slaughtering it. Do you know where they salt and smoke meat here?”

“Yes, I know. I can go and look. And while I search, you wait in my room, okay?”

“Does it have a window facing the yard?” Petter asked. “And binoculars?”

“Yes.”

“Great—then I can spy while you gather the equipment.”

Chapter 11

Hanna’s Room

Hanna led Petter into the house, up a staircase, and into a bedroom.

“Wait here,” she said, stepped out, and closed the door behind her.

Petter sat down on the bed in the small room—the only place to sit. The bedding was soft and had a blue floral pattern. There was also a bedside table with candles, a dresser with a dollhouse, a wardrobe, a small window overlooking the courtyard, and a simple, flat bookshelf screwed into the wall above the bed.

The bedside table had a pink embroidered cloth, an alarm clock, and a German book. Petter guessed it was a children’s book, because there was a picture of girls on it—and a horse.

On the shelf above the bed there were many other books. All of them were in German except for a few Norwegian schoolbooks. Of the German ones, he guessed



the biggest—Die Bibel—was the Bible. Did she actually read it, or was it just something she'd been given as a gift? In a few years there would be confirmation, so maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to take a look in it.

Petter opened the drawer in the bedside table. Hanna had said she had binoculars, but she had forgotten to take them out before she left.

They weren't in the drawer. There were only a few small smooth stones in pretty colours, a stack of letters, a golden letter opener, and some jewellery.

He closed the drawer to the sound of stones rolling inside. Petter's family was poor, but stealing jewellery from a German girl whose father was a commander in the German army—no, he wasn't that stupid. The thought had popped into his head, but he had chased it away as fast as he could.

What about the dresser? First, he admired the fine dollhouse standing on top. Petter had a little sister who also liked dolls, but they were in sixth grade now—did Hanna still play with them, or were they just for decoration? The dollhouse was filled with tiny hand-painted furniture, three lady dolls in nice clothes, a baby, and a man in a German uniform.

He pulled out the top drawer. Clothes, underwear, and socks. He shut it quickly. What about the drawer beneath?

Bingo! A mess of stuff: a small hand mirror, makeup, a music box with a ballerina, coloured pencils, paper—and best of all: binoculars.

Petter took them to the window and looked out. He adjusted the focus until he had a close-up of the guards in the towers. They had rifles and large searchlights to use at night, but they kept looking down at the opposite side of the wall. In other words, they were focused on threats *outside* the fortress—not inside. With a bit of luck, none of the guards would see him during the rescue mission on the inside.

Down in the courtyard there were also some German soldiers, but they all seemed busy with different tasks—fixing a car, playing cards, carrying water, or hauling crates. If everyone had something to do, why would they look up into the air, toward the third floor?

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” he said. But why would Hanna knock on her own door?



It opened, and in came a tall man with a large, thick black moustache, neatly combed black hair, and a dark-green German uniform. The insignia on his shoulders showed he was an officer—an Oberst, a colonel.

The commandant!

Chapter 12

The Commandant

“Hallo,” the man said. He stepped into the small bedroom and closed the door behind him. On his belt he had a holster with a *pistol*.

“I heard my dear daughter has a visitor. My name is Klaus.”

He held out his hand, and Petter hurried to shake it.

“H-hi,” he managed to mumble.

Klaus looked around the small room. “Where is Hanna?”

“Uh … in the toilet,” Petter said.

“I see.” Klaus stared at him, measuring him from the tufts of hair to the worn shoes. “So, you are Peter, correct?”

“Yes—well, Petter. You know, a little nickname.”

“Verstanden¹⁸ … Are you good at school, Petter?”

“Well …”

Klaus raised an eyebrow. “Only ‘well’? I do not want my daughter to waste time on an *ein Dummkopf*. Or what do you say in Norwegian … Idiot? Fool? Bum?”

“No, no,” Petter said, waving his hands. “I mean yes, I’m very good! Good at school, yes. Of course. I just didn’t want to brag. Humility is a virtue, you know—like Jesus said.”

¹⁸ I see.

“Das ist gut.¹⁹ And how are the Bible studies going? Are you getting ready for confirmation?”

Oh yes, no problem. I read every night. I already know it all by heart—Bible up, down, and sideways. I can probably help your daughter when the time comes.” Petter smiled as confidently as he could.

“M-hm. Then you can surely answer a few questions?”

“… Maybe?”



“Let us start with something truly *easy*.” Klaus stroked his moustache. “What were the names of the three Wise Men, and what gifts did they bring to the baby Jesus when he was born?”

“Ah … ha! Ha-ha,” Petter said. “It isn’t school today, you rascal. Hanna and I just wanted to relax today, play a little.”

So, you cannot answer? Such an *easy* question!”

“Yes, yes, they brought gold and smoke and things—everyone knows that … and you know the answers too, right? Yes, everyone knows that! The three Wise Men are the three Wise Men, yes, yes, truly—from the east and from the west—so I don’t need to stand here and give long explanations about the exact pronunciation of each individual name …”

“Are you trying to fool me, boy?”

“What? I would never—”

The door opened a crack, and Hanna poked her head in. Her eyes went wide when she saw her father.

“Papa!”

“Ah, Hanna.” Klaus turned to her. “I am only talking a little with your new friend.”

She came in with her schoolbag behind her back.

“Papa, go!” she said. “We alone want to be.”

“Hm …” Klaus grunted. He ran his fingers along his moustache again and shot Petter an ugly look.

¹⁹ That’s good.

“Yes, natürlich.²⁰ You may be here. But do not go up to the third floor. I have *very* important guests today, and we do *not* want to be disturbed!”

He pulled out a pocket watch and looked at it.

“Especially not during the next hour! Stay here in the room, verstanden? ²¹”

“Yes, Papa.”

He left, and Hanna closed the door behind him. She let out a relieved breath and handed the schoolbag to Petter. He opened it and pulled out a rope, a hook, and three screwdrivers.



“I didn’t know which screwdriver you would want,” she said. “There were many different ones.”

“One of these will surely fit—thank you so much.” Petter picked up the hook and studied it. It was shaped like the letter S and sharp at both ends. He took the end of the rope and tied a knot around the hook.

“Hope it doesn’t just slip off,” he said.

“Did it go okay with Papa?” Hanna asked. “He can be very strict.”

“No problems. We became friends very quickly. But good you came when you did—otherwise our friendship would have crashed.”

“Oh, he likes no one,” Hanna said, “not even me or Mama.”

“Oh, he probably does,” Petter said. “Maybe he’s just bad at showing it. Some parents are like that—my dad too.”

“Yes, maybe.”

“Shall we go up to the third floor?”

Hanna shook her head vigorously. “Didn’t you hear Papa? He has important guests! We are not allowed to go up there.”

“Pah!” Petter said. “The only guest of his who matters is Sara. Can’t we just sneak past?”

“... Maybe.” Hanna looked uncertain. “But if they find us?”

“Then we make sure that doesn’t happen.” Petter opened the door and peeked into the hallway. First, he saw the staircase they had come up. The corridor continued past three windows before it ended at another staircase going up.

²⁰ Of course.

²¹ Understood?

Next to Hanna’s door was another closed door, and an open passage leading deeper into the floor.

“What other rooms are here?” Petter asked.

“Bedroom, laundry room, living room ...” Hanna said. “I don’t think anyone else is here now. This house is only for my family, and Mama is downstairs in the kitchen. She is dinner making. Papa is upstairs with the guests—he has a big office up there.”



“Okay,” Petter said, and crept toward the stairs that led up. He stopped, listened, and heard voices upstairs. They were speaking German.

“Will it be the same corridor up there with three windows, like here?”

“Yes,” Hanna said.

“Can your father or his guests see us from the room where they’re meeting?”

“Maybe,” Hanna said. “The door must be open, since we them so well can hear.”

“Well, they’re talking loudly,” Petter said. “They probably won’t hear us.” He snuck up the stairs.

Chapter 13

The Nazis’ Sinister Plans

When Petter stuck his head up from the staircase to the third floor, he saw the corridor stretch forward until it ended at the wall on the far side. Along the outer wall were three windows, just like downstairs, and on the opposite wall there were two doors, a painting, and an open passage leading deeper into the floor.

One of the doors was slightly ajar, and loud German voices came from inside. He couldn’t see any guards.

“Come,” he whispered, and crept over to the half-open door. He peeked in. It was a large office with a round table in the middle. Six men sat in comfortable chairs around the table. They talked, laughed, smoked large cigars, and held small glasses.

“What!” Petter yelped before clapping a hand over his mouth and jerking back from the doorway. His neck prickled, and cold ran through his whole body.

“What is it?” Hanna whispered beside him.

“T-that man with the little moustache,” he whispered. “I-I think it’s *Adolf Hitler* himself! I’ve seen his picture in the newspaper.”

Hanna leaned forward and looked in, then pulled back again.

“Yes,” she said. “That is Uncle Adolf.”

“Uncle! What the heck! Are you *related*?”

“No,” she said. “I just call him that. He is kind. He always brought bonbons for me when he visited in Berlin.”

“Bonbons?”

“Hm …” Hanna thought. “Candy.”



“Aha.” Petter peeked curiously into the smoky room again. Five of the six men wore German uniforms, including Klaus and Adolf, but one of the others wore an ordinary grey suit. They smiled and laughed, puffed on cigars, and clinked their glasses.

On the table between them lay a large map of the Atlantic Ocean between Norway and England. It had pins stuck in it with British and German flags. Crosses and arrows had been drawn in with black ink. On the map were things that looked like toy figurines—small models of ships and submarines—and one of the men moved them around.

“What are they talking about?” Petter asked.

Hanna stood listening for a moment. “They are talking about the submarine bunker here in Årvik and the new one they are building in Trondheim, and how the submarines will be used against England.”

“Okay,” Petter said. “Just war talk, then?”

“Yes,” she said. “And something about a specially built submarine. It is lying in the cavern under the fortress with a gigantic bomb right now.”

Petter’s ears perked up. “Hold on—what did you say? A *gigantic* bomb? How big?”

“A super bomb—four meters long and five tons heavy—but relax, it is going on to England.”

“What do you mean, *relax*?” Petter said. “You just mentioned a *super bomb*! That sounds *super important*! But … you must have heard wrong. Five tons is heavier than an elephant. Is it really possible to make bombs that big?”

“The man in the grey suit calls it an atomic bomb,” Hanna said. “He made it. Apparently, it is something completely new, something that can win the war. They will sail later today to detonate the bomb in London’s harbour. That is why Uncle—uh … Hitler is here. He came to wish the crew good luck.”

“We have to stop them!” Petter said.

“No,” Hanna said. “You cannot. That is Papa’s job, and they will take us. Don’t you want to save Sara?”

“Yes …”

“Then we must do that. I can help with *that*—nothing else!”



Petter cursed to himself, but Hanna was right. What could they do? They might not even manage to save Sara. What hope did they have of saving England?

“Okay, but I want to learn a little about the bomb,” Petter said. “Can you tell me more?”

“It is dangerous to stand here listening.”

“Please.”

Hanna sighed, but she stayed and listened.

“The man in the grey suit is the scientist Werner Heisenberg. I greeted him in Berlin—Papa said he the Nobel Prize in physics has won.”

“Smart guy,” Petter said.

“He is the one talking about the bomb. Very proud he is. He has used heavy water from Norway and uranium from Czechoslovakia, but he says there is not enough uranium for more bombs. So, they have only one chance to blow up London.”

“Thankfully,” Petter said. “Do you know who the others are?”

“Yes. I greeted them earlier today, before you I visited. Hermann Boehm—he is the head of the submarines in Norway. And Nikolaus von Falkenhorst—he is the head of the military. The last one in uniform is Heinrich Gällnitz, a submarine captain from Trondheim. He is the one who will sail the bomb to London.”

“Now I wish I had a grenade,” Petter said.

“You must not hurt Papa!” Hanna smacked Petter on the head.

“Ow.”

“We have to go,” Hanna said, and took a step away from the door—then froze. Her face had turned completely pale, and her lower lip began to tremble.

“What?” Petter asked, rubbing his head. “Did you hear something else?”

She nodded, her eyes bright with fear.

“Adolf … he said … he said … no, it is *too* horrible.”

“What? Spit it out.”

“That bomb is so big that … everyone in *all* of London is going to die.”

“Everyone in the harbour, you mean?”

“No—everyone *in the whole city*. Men, women, children—every single person. And those who survive will be so injured or sick that death they will soon wish for.”

“B-but a bomb *that* powerful can’t be real!” Petter said, shocked.



“W-we must get away from here,” Hanna said. “This is top secret. We are not allowed to hear any of it—especially not you. They will think a spy you are! I-if they find you here now, they will … they will … *shoot you*.”

Chapter 14

Tarzan Gets Ready

“Let’s save Sara,” Petter said. “And then get away!”

Hanna nodded.

They crept over to the window farthest down the corridor, where no one from the meeting room could see them.

Petter looked out and spotted the other building. It was perfect! The square vent opening was right across from them on the other side, only a few meters away. There was a small plate with slats inside the opening, but if they could just remove the plate, they could climb straight in.

Petter undid the latch and pushed the window open as carefully and silently as he could, but the hinges creaked a little.

“Shh,” Hanna whispered. “If they hear …”

“Yeah, yeah,” Petter whispered back. The window was wide open now, and the curtains fluttered slightly. He got ready, felt the rope in his hands, and tried to calculate the throw. He had to get the hook into the opening so it could catch on the slats. But what if he missed?

“Are you good at throwing a lasso?” Hanna asked.

“Oh yes,” he answered automatically. At least he had seen it in the cinema, and it didn’t look that hard. The cowboys hit every time. And a rope with a hook wasn’t exactly a lasso—it had to be easier, right?

“Are you going to throw the hook over to the grille?” Hanna whispered.

“That’s the plan,” he said.

Why was there even a grille in a vent that high up? Maybe to keep birds from getting into the ventilation system … or children with ropes?

Petter clenched his teeth, swung his arm, threw—and the rope flew out the window, through the air, missed, and fell. The rope tightened in his hands, and he heard the hook thud against the wall one floor below.

“You didn’t even reach the other side!” Hanna protested.



“Well …” Petter cleared his throat. “That was just a practice throw. It helps me judge the distance—every rope thrower does that.”

He leaned out and looked down. The hook had hit the wall between two windows. If it had smashed one of them, the whole fortress would have heard them! Petter glanced nervously at the soldiers outside, but everything still looked peaceful. The guards in the towers still stood with their backs turned, watching the other side, and the nearest soldier on the ground was bent under the hood of a car, turning something with a wrench while humming along to music from a big radio on the car roof.

Petter pulled the rope until he got the hook back.

“Could you stop practicing?” Hanna said. “I’m afraid someone will hear you.”

Petter didn’t answer. He just crouched with the hook in his hand and focused. This time he threw much harder—everything he had.

The rope with the hook flew straight over the building and landed on the roof.

“… I can throw better than that,” Hanna said with a sigh.

Petter pulled on the rope until it stopped. The hook had caught in a small gap between the roof tiles.

“I aimed for that gap,” he said as smugly as he could. “I figured it would be smarter to fasten the rope there. Then I can hang down by my legs and unscrew the grille—much better than stretching forward.” Hanna looked at him with wide eyes. Did she buy it?

“Oh, yes,” she said. “Clever.”

“Here,” Petter said, handing her the end of the rope. “Hold tight while I climb across.”

“No.”

“No?”

“You are heavy and will pull me out. We both fall.” She let her hands flutter through the air, wiggling her fingers as if showing their bodies flailing while they fell toward the ground. Then she clapped her hands together. “Death!”

“Come on, just hold tight.”

“No.”

Petter sighed. Okay—then the plan was bad. He was probably heavier than Hanna, so she was probably right. He thought and thought, but no new idea came.



“So what do we do?” he whispered.

“We can tie the rope to the hook,” Hanna said.

“Hook? Which hook? The one we threw over?”

“No, dummkopf.” She rolled her eyes, turned around, and lifted down the painting hanging there. The wire on the back had been hanging from a hook in the wall.

It was a large, heavy painting, and the hook looked quite sturdy—but … big enough to hold his weight? Well, there was only one way to find out.

Petter barely managed to tie the end of the rope to the hook with a bowline. There wasn’t room for more knots. He gave the rope a little tug. It was tight enough, and the hook held.

“Okay,” he whispered, and climbed onto the windowsill. A mild breeze swept past and ruffled his hair. The rope swayed slightly back and forth between the two buildings.

“You are Tarzan,” Hanna whispered, smiling encouragingly as she handed him the gloves.

“Yep,” Petter said, putting them on. They were a bit tight—maybe Hanna’s own—but they would protect his hands from the rough rope as he pulled himself across.

He took a firm grip on the rope, prepared to swing his leg over … But standing on the windowsill and looking down, the three floors seemed higher than before. He didn’t feel like any Tarzan at all. He had stuffed a screwdriver into each trouser pocket and the last one down into his right shoe—but what if none of them fit? What if the plate was screwed in from the other side? What if he couldn’t climb over—or back again? What if he fell …

“Are you good at climbing a rope?” Hanna asked.

“The best.”

He stayed there … for a long time. The questions kept spinning around in his head, and his doubt grew.

“Do you need a push?” Hanna asked.

Petter sighed and climbed down from the windowsill.

“I don’t think—” he began, when someone came out of the meeting room. Adolf Hitler!



They stared straight into each other's eyes.

Chapter 15

Hitler's Fury!

“Spy!” Hitler roared furiously. “Saboteur! Secret agent!” He fumbled with the holster on his belt and yanked out a weapon—a Walther PPK, a German semi-automatic pistol!

BANG! The first shot slammed into the wood of the windowsill, right by Petter’s ear!

“Uncle, nein!” Hanna cried and stepped in front of him, but Hitler shoved her brutally aside so she crashed into the wall and fell to the floor!

A hundred ideas tore through Petter’s head, but in ninety-nine of them he ended up dead! He made a choice, and with a quick leap and nimble fingers he jerked the rope free from the hook in the wall.

BANG! Another shot chipped splinters from the wall. He ducked, ran, and slipped up onto the windowsill in a soft, catlike movement, grabbed the rope, and swung out through the open window like a desperate jungle ape leaping from one tree to the next.

Petter’s body dropped, wind rushing through his hair, his stomach lurching—until the rope snapped taut and flung him forward, smashing him into the wall one floor below. He clung on for dear life, fighting to keep pain and panic under control. Damn it! This was madness.

He glanced down and spotted the car roof with the radio just a few meters below. The mechanic stood there, shocked, staring up at him. German soldiers came running from every direction. They shouted and loaded their rifles.

BANG! Petter jerked so hard he almost lost his grip!

He looked up. In the open window stood the stern man with the little moustache. Adolf Hitler. And in his hand he still had the pistol, aimed straight at him!

BANG! Another shot. Plaster burst from a fresh bullet hole beside his head.

Hell—they were really trying to kill him!



“For God’s sake, don’t—” he shouted, but Hitler took aim again, and Petter let go and dropped.

Until everything went black.

Again.

Chapter 16

The Dungeon

Sara sat on the floor in a corner of the cell with her knees pulled up and her arms wrapped around them.

She wasn’t crying anymore. There was nothing left—no tears. This was the end, the waiting room of death.

There had been rumors of Jews being shot or arrested in Trondheim, but they were only rumors. She hadn’t believed it could truly be that bad. She had thought maybe they’d done something wrong—attacked the Germans, perhaps—and that everything would be fine as long as she behaved. But here she was.

Trondheim also felt far away, distant from little Arvik, the place where everyone used to be happy and kind to each other. They had been, at least, until the Germans came.

The dark cell held almost nothing: a bed, a locked door, and a small square high up on the wall with bars in front. Air and a thin beam of light came through it, but not enough; it was still dark and damp, and it smelled rotten and dead. Maybe a previous prisoner had died in here before her?

There was no window to look out of. Where were Mum and Dad? In another cell?

The door handle went down, and Sara shrank back, trying to make herself invisible.

Light flooded in as the door opened. It stabbed at her eyes. Were they coming to get her?

A boy was thrown in like a sack of potatoes. He hit the floor hard and lay there without moving.

“Petter?” Sara said when she recognized him.

The door shut, and it was dark again.



She crawled over to him.

“Hey, Petter, are you okay?” But he was unconscious. He also had a bandage around his head, and lots of bruises and small cuts.

“What have they done to you?” she whispered, mostly to herself.

She dragged him over to the bed and got him onto it, then pulled the filthy blanket over him. He needed a doctor, not a prison cell.

Maybe he was the reason for the commotion and the gunshots outside?

Sara gasped. Maybe he’d been shot! She pulled off his shirt and checked his back, chest, stomach, and arms, but she couldn’t find any bullet holes. She unbuttoned his trousers and started to pull them down.

Then the door opened again, and a girl was shoved inside—tall, with long blond hair and a plaster on her forehead. It took Sara a few seconds to realize who it was.

“Hanna?” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“I...” Hanna began, but stopped, her eyes going wide and her face turning bright red. “Sara! W-what are you doing to Petter?”

“He might be shot,” Sara said. “If he’s bleeding somewhere, I have to stop it.”

“He’s not shot,” Hanna said. She walked over to Petter with determined steps and pulled the blanket over him. “Just fainted. He’s good at fainting.”

“But I heard shooting,” Sara said.

“Yes, but Petter fell onto the roof of a car, and then they stopped shooting.”

“Fell down?” Sara looked like a giant question mark.

“Yes, we wanted to rescue you. Big rescue mission. Petter not so smart, but very brave.”

“Oh, yes...” Sara said. “That sounds like him. But you wanted to rescue me too? I thought you hated me.”

Hanna lowered her head and looked down at her feet.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I only wanted to be your friend.”

It was the last thing Sara expected to hear.

“But what about what you said in the bomb shelter at school?”

“That was yesterday.” Hanna sank down by the door and sat with it as a backrest. “A lot has happened since yesterday.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“Your father is the boss here,” Sara said. “So why are you under arrest?”



Hanna sighed. "Today, my papa not the boss. Adolf is the boss over all bosses, and he said I tried to help a spy, and that I love Jews."

"Love!" Sara burst out, feeling her cheeks burn. "M-me?"

"Not like a boyfriend," Hanna said with a small smile. "It's what many people in Germany say, just because you want to be friends with a Jew. Either love or hate—nothing in between."

"Oh... right."

They sat in silence a little while longer.

"You?" Sara asked.

"Yes?"

"Do you know what will happen to me?"

"Jews who are strong work at the fortress."

"And the ones who are weak?"

"To Poland, I think... But it's not good to go there."

"I'm weak."

Hanna gave her a sad look, but didn't say anything.

"What about you?" Sara asked.

"I am the commandant's daughter. They will probably let me out when Adolf is less angry, I hope. Or he is so angry that papa no longer can be commandant. I-I don't know."

"And him?" Sara nodded toward Petter.

"Not good what they said about him. Words like spy and saboteur. Adults have been shot for less, but he is only a boy. So I don't know."

"Maybe his parents will be punished instead," Sara said.

"Yes, maybe." Hanna let her head fall back until it thumped against the door, and she stared up at the ceiling.

"That air hole up there," she said, smiling a little. "I think that's where Petter tried to get in. And if he had managed it, he actually would have found you."

"And what was the plan after that?" Sara asked. "If he had managed to get in?"

Hanna sighed. "Ask Petter when he wakes up. I'm not good at plans like that."

"Neither is Petter," Sara said. "That I can promise you."

Just then a groan came from the bed, and Petter slowly sat up.

He put a hand to his head, groaned once more, and looked around.



“Damn!”

Chapter 17

Is It Possible to Escape?

“My rescuer,” Sara said. “Are you okay?”

“My head is pounding like my brain is trying to break out of my skull, but apart from that ... I feel miserable.”

“Tell your brain to come up with a plan to break us out of here instead,” Sara said.

“Where’s my shirt?” Petter asked.

“Here.” Sara picked up a bundle from the floor and tossed it onto Petter’s bed.

“Thanks ... but ... why are my trousers unbuttoned?”

“Uh, well ...” Sara fiddled with her hands in her lap.

“Yes, explain yourself,” Hanna said, grinning at her.

“Okay,” Sara said. “It was Hanna. She’s never seen a boy’s private parts before, so she seized the opportunity, but I stopped her in time.”

“WHAT!” Hanna shouted.

“Oops,” Petter said, blushing.

“Das ist eine Lüge!” Hanna yelled. “Typical Jew. Lügenpresse!”

“I’m just joking,” Sara said with a smile.

“Yes! Joking!” Hanna shouted.

There was a hard knock on the door, and they heard a deep male voice with a German accent outside.

“Ztille in there!”

The three of them fell silent.

“Cell guard?” Petter whispered.

Hanna nodded.

They sat quietly for a while.

“Hitler shot at me,” Petter said. “I could have died.”

“He thought you were a spy,” Hanna said.

“He probably still does,” Petter said. “And the punishment for that is death, right?”

“They wouldn’t have put us in a cell,” Sara said, “if they wanted us dead.”

“Temporarily in a cell,” Petter said. “I think they’re arguing about what our punishment should be. The fact that Hanna is the commander’s daughter probably makes it more complicated than usual.”



“Well, anyway,” Sara said, closing her eyes and folding her hands in prayer. “It’s up to God now.”

“But look how close you were,” Hanna said, pointing at the ventilation hole. “That’s where you tried to get in.”

Petter looked up. “Wow, I was actually closer to rescuing Sara than I thought.”

“Well,” Sara said, opening her eyes, “that depends on what you mean by rescuing. What was your plan after that?”

“Hmm … I thought that if I got in and found you, we could get out again too. The same way, maybe.”

“Great, now you’re inside,” Sara said. “And you’ve found me. Congratulations.”

“The rope is probably still hanging outside,” Petter said, getting up from the bed. “We’re on the third floor, but if we can reach the rope, we can easily climb down.”

“Forget it,” Hanna said. “There’s a metal plate with bars in the ventilation hole.”

“But I still have a screwdriver,” Petter said, pulling a small tool out of his shoe. “They took the screwdrivers from my pockets when I was arrested, but they didn’t find this one. If it fits …”

Sara looked up at the small square in the wall, just below the ceiling. Was Petter right? Could they actually get out?

“Too high up,” Hanna said. “You can’t reach it.”

Petter stood beneath the hole and jumped. He barely managed to grab the lower edge and hung by his fingertips. He flailed and groaned a little before losing his grip.

Hanna shook her head in disbelief.

“It has to work!” Petter said. “With a running start!” He walked to the other side of the cell and turned around, ready to sprint.

“You’ll just crash into the wall,” Hanna said. “And pass out again.”

“Wait,” Sara said. “Do you really think you can unscrew the bars in the ventilation hole?”

“Of course,” he said. “I can see the screws, they’re on the right side.”

“Oh, they’re on the right side now,” Hanna said. “So the rescue mission was always doomed to fail because the screws were facing the wrong way?”

Petter sighed. “When confronted with the bars, my muscles would have swollen up, and I would have just torn them out of the wall with my fingers.”

“You were dangling from a rope outside,” Hanna said. “How would you tear anything out with your fingers then?”

“I would have torn it out with … with … my teeth!”

“Stop it,” Sara said. “The only thing that would have swollen is your head. But if I manage to get you up to the bars, then what?”

“I unscrew the plate, we crawl through the hole, climb down the rope outside and escape. Simple.”

“We’ll be shot,” Hanna said.



"We'll be shot if we don't escape," Petter said. "I'm sure of it."

Sara walked over to the bed and pushed it against the wall beneath the ventilation hole.

"There," she said.

"Smart," Petter said. "But it's still not high enough."

"It is if you two help me," Sara said. "We can tilt the bed up against the wall, and then we can climb up to the hole!"

Chapter 19

With Death at Their Heels

"Damn it!" Petter said. "Come on, hurry! Time's up!"

He scrambled through the opening in the wall and grabbed the rope that was still dangling down from the roof on the other side.

"Yes, time's up, thanks to you!" Hanna said irritably as she followed close behind.

Petter didn't answer, but slid quickly down the rope outside. It hung almost all the way down to the car, and he landed neatly on the roof while his eyes searched for soldiers. Luckily, the mechanic was no longer there.

The rope twisted and coiled as Hanna slid down as well and landed beside him.

They looked up. Sara was leaning out of the opening and had grabbed hold of the rope.

"Hurry!" Petter whispered as loudly as he dared, but she didn't move, as if frozen.

BANG! The sound of a gunshot from inside the cell jolted her into motion, and she let herself down, trying to keep her grip on the rope.

Hanna gasped beside him, and Petter felt as if time froze. He saw Sara lose her grip in slow motion. She managed to grab the rope again, slowed her fall a little, but then lost her hold once more with a scream.

Petter stretched out his arms and clenched his teeth.

Sara's body hit him like a kick from a horse, and they fell down onto the hood of the car. He lost his breath and saw stars dancing before his eyes.

... . . . At last he managed to draw breath again. He filled his lungs gratefully and coughed.

"S-sara?" he managed to force out through the pain.

"She's okay," Hanna said. "You saved her—and without fainting. Good job."

Sara stood beside the car. She looked all right, but her frightened eyes darted around, searching for threats.

"Great," Petter said. He coughed once more as he slid down from the hood and landed on aching legs.

"Don't celebrate yet," Hanna said. "We're still in the middle of an escape!"

BANG! A bullet swept up dust beside Petter's foot. He looked up and saw a pistol pointing at them from the opening three floors above.



"The guard is shooting at us!" Hanna said. "B-but I'm standing here. Papa is going to be so angry!"

Petter grabbed her arm and pulled her along.

"You can argue with trigger-happy soldiers later," he said. "Inside the tank we're safe—they can't hit us there."

Angry German voices came from inside the building, and Petter heard doors fly open behind them as they ran.

BANG! BANG!

More shots flew past. The sound of barking dogs mixed with the angry shouts.

"The shepherds!" Hanna cried desperately. "They've set the dogs on us!"

Petter glanced over his shoulder and saw a German soldier struggling with four barking, eager dogs, straining at their leashes, desperate to break free and sink their teeth into their juicy flesh. The soldier bent down, unclipped one leash, and the first German shepherd shot forward, sprinting across the ground toward them, hungry for blood.

"Damn it!" he shouted. "Don't turn around! Just run! We're almost there!"

Sara and Hanna turned and gasped.

"Don't slow down!" Petter shouted as Sara nearly tripped over her own feet while staring back in terror at the dogs. He grabbed her arm and pulled her back up to speed.

They sprinted the last stretch across the yard and reached the tank.

"How do you climb up?" Sara shouted. "It's huge!"

"Three meters up to the hatch on top," Petter said. "Just do what I do."

He placed his foot on one of the wide tracks and climbed upward, using handles, bolts, and edges in the hull to pull himself higher.

Petter stopped to catch his breath and glanced back. Soldiers were running toward them from all directions with rifles and pistols in their hands, but they weren't shooting. Maybe they had finally realized that the commandant's daughter could be hit. Or maybe they realized the children were climbing straight into a trap. If he couldn't get the tank started, they would be surrounded and captured.

"Help!" Hanna shouted from below. Petter turned and saw Sara reaching up a hand while Hanna pushed from behind.

Sara was the shortest of them and struggled the most with the climb.

Petter grabbed hold and pulled her up onto the hull before climbing the last stretch up to the turret hatch via the gun barrel.

He looked down and saw something horrible. The first dog had reached them—it growled, barked, jumped up and clamped its jaws onto Hanna's shoe! She was left hanging with only one foot on the tank's track. The other was being dragged down by the shepherd!

Chapter 20

Inside the Panther



Hanna clung desperately to the hull while the dog growled and tugged at her shoe, trying to drag her all the way down. She held on for dear life.

The other dogs came barking close behind, ready to fight for their share of the meal.

Suddenly the shepherd tore the shoe clean off and tumbled backward. Hanna climbed the rest of the way up as fast as she could. The other dogs leapt after her, but their paws only scraped and clawed against the smooth metal, and they slid back down.

Petter grabbed the handle of the hatch on top of the turret, lifted it slightly and slid it sideways, just as he remembered from the military magazine. The Panther was open!

He looked down into the round, dark opening. Luckily there were no German soldiers inside. The tank was empty—it was theirs. They had captured it! He waved Sara up beside him and helped her down through the hatch. Hanna climbed up with only one shoe right behind and disappeared into the darkness as well.

Petter lowered himself down last, grabbed the hatch and was about to close it.

They were completely surrounded now. Every soldier in the fortress was staring at them with weapons in hand, and among them stood Klaus, Hanna's father, mouth open and eyes wide with shock. And beside him—Adolf Hitler. He barked an order in German, and one of the soldiers raised his pistol, aimed—

Petter ducked just as the shot rang out. The metal hinges groaned as he pulled the hatch shut over his head. Inside, there was a rotating locking lever. Petter gripped it tightly, thankful he still had his gloves on, and twisted it hard until the hatch was locked.

At last, safe—for now—inside a Panther tank. He exhaled in relief and listened to the frustrated barking outside. Safe from bullets and dogs, at least for a little while.

It was cramped inside, especially with Sara and Hanna, but a Panther was designed to be operated by five adult men—a commander, gunner, loader, driver, and radio operator—so there was enough room.

The interior was worn, with scratches all over the metal. Screws, bolts, plates, and weld seams were everywhere. It smelled sharply of oil and gunpowder.

Petter squeezed into the commander's seat, while Sara and Hanna took the gunner's and loader's seats a bit lower down, close enough that they could see each other and speak in low voices.

When he stood up, he could look out through six fixed periscopes made of bulletproof glass, arranged in a ring at the top of the turret so the commander could see in all directions.

A German pistol—a Walther PPK like the one Hitler had used—was mounted on the wall along with other interesting items: a plastic sleeve full of maps, headphones, and a photograph of a woman with two small children.

From one bolt hung a necklace with a Christian cross, but the most important thing—and something he hadn't even thought about until now—was the key. Thank goodness! It hung from another chain on the same bolt.



This was the happiest day of Petter's life—provided it didn't turn out to be his last

...

Chapter 21

Take Your Positions, Ready ...

“All right, Herr Heinz Guderian, what now?” Hanna asked.

Petter had to smile when he recognized the name of Germany's leading general in armored warfare.

“Children!” Klaus's voice boomed from outside. “Come out at once! You are surrounded!”

“Don't listen to him,” Petter said to the other two. “I found the key. They probably never thought the tank was in danger of being stolen, considering it's right in the middle of a German fortress. They also probably think we can't get it moving—but we actually can!”

Petter thought for a moment.

“If we're going to pull this off, we have to work together as a team. I can drive, but the driver sits all the way at the front on the left and has a terrible periscope—it's fixed in the hull and only shows straight ahead.”

“Which means you can't see where to turn,” Hanna said.

“Exactly,” Petter said. “In a tank, the commander is the eyes. He sits here, and up there...” He pointed to the six narrow windows at the top of the turret, “...are the periscopes. They give a view all the way around the tank. One of you has to be commander. Any volunteers?”

Hanna and Sara glanced nervously at each other, but in the end Sara raised her hand.

“I can try,” she said.

“Great!”

“And what am I supposed to do?” Hanna asked.

“There's a machine gun up front next to the driver...”

“I'm not going to shoot anyone!” Hanna said firmly, crossing her arms.

“No, of course not,” Petter said, scratching his head. “Just be ready to help. Right now, we have to get out of here before the soldiers outside come up with something clever. Sara tells me where to turn, and I drive.”

“But how can you hear her?” Hanna asked. “I was here when the Panther arrived, and it made an awful lot of noise.”

“Ah, I forgot about that!” Petter said. “The engine is a V-12 with 650 horsepower, so it's very loud. But there are headsets in here with throat microphones. We have to put them on. They're made so the crew can talk to each other even with the noise of the engine and combat.”



“Do we have to press a button for them to work?” Sara asked, switching places with Petter. She settled into the commander’s seat, took the dusty headphones from the shelf inside the hull, and put them on.

“No button,” Petter said. “Everything should work as soon as we turn on the power, but the microphone band has to sit around your neck, and there’s a cable that has to be plugged into a box where you’re sitting.” He pointed to the box in the hull by the commander’s seat. Sara grabbed the cable dangling from the headphones and pushed the plug into the socket.

“You can adjust the volume with that switch,” Petter said, pointing. Sara gave a thumbs-up.

He climbed down to the driver’s seat at the front of the tank and found the headphones in a box. He put them on and sat down.

Hanna sat in a seat slightly higher up in the turret behind him. She also put on headphones and plugged the cable into a box in the wall.

Everyone was in position.

Chapter 22 ... steady ...

“Do you see anything out there?” Petter asked.

Sara stood looking through the periscopes at the top of the turret.

“Yes, I can see most of it. German soldiers everywhere. They’re standing around talking. Probably wondering what they’re going to do with us.”

“Is there anything they can do?” Hanna asked. “How do you stop a tank?”

“With another tank,” Petter said, “and they don’t have one. The only thing they can do is ... well ... they could shoot with an anti-tank rifle, but why would they have that kind of weapon when they’ve got a whole Panther ... although they could try to blow up our tracks with hand grenades.”

“Enough talk!” Sara said. “Get us out of here before they try anything!”

“Yes, sir!” Petter said, forcing himself to focus on task number one: starting the giant beast. The time had come—the time to drive a real Panther!

Petter put the key in the ignition and glanced over his shoulder at Hanna. “Wish me luck!”

She stared into the air with a concentrated expression.

“What is it?” Petter asked.

“Papa is shouting that if we don’t come out now, they’re going to blow us up.”

“Empty threats,” Petter said. “I hope ... okay, then I’ll wake the wild beast!”

“Good luck,” Hanna said, crossing the fingers of both hands.

Petter nodded, turned back and studied the instrument panel. He twisted the switch marked *hauptschalter*, which turned on the power if he remembered correctly, then pulled the metal lever marked *starterklappe* for choke, and finally turned the key with



a small prayer that the battery wasn't dead. Lights and gauges flickered on. A soft hum vibrated through the hull.

"Wonderful!" Petter said. "The battery works! The Panther has awakened, lying ready like a predator in the bushes, ready to pounce! Hear how it purrs like electric kittens."

"How nice that you're enjoying yourself," Hanna said. Her voice came through the headphones, clear and loud now that the power was on.

Petter cleared his throat and pressed the starter button.

The entire tank shook and rattled with a gigantic roar like a wounded lion! ... before it actually died. The engine fell silent again, and the German voices outside grew louder and sharper.

"Damn it! I stalled it," Petter said, thinking fast. "Of course—you have to press the clutch first in a tank."

Petter planted his foot on the far-left pedal and pushed it down. It was incredibly heavy, but sank to the floor when he used all his strength.

He pressed the starter button again. The Panther coughed and spluttered, then roared to life once more like a lion—or more precisely: like a panther. The engine thundered violently, but thankfully the headphones also worked as hearing protection.

"Woo-hoo!" Petter shouted into the microphone. "The beast is awake!" He put the gear stick into first gear and pressed the accelerator with his right foot while carefully releasing the clutch.

The tank began to roll forward slowly, and Petter shifted up one gear.

"We're moving!" Hanna shouted excitedly over the noise. "Great job, Petter! Just don't crash into a wall!"

"Uh ..." Petter grabbed the two steering levers. "Sara!" he shouted. "Which way to the exit? Left or right?"

He looked up at Sara, but she was curled up in her seat with her hands over the headphones and her eyes closed.

"Sara!"

She didn't answer.

Chapter 23

Go!

"Can't you see for yourself?" Hanna asked. "There's a hatch in the roof above your head."

"Yes, it can be opened," Petter replied. "But I'm not sticking my head out into the open. They'll shoot me right in the forehead!"

He peered into the driver's periscope, the one fixed in the hull that could only see straight ahead, and it was dirty. All he could see was the fortress wall drawing closer and closer.

"Hanna, go shake Sara awake. She has to tell me where to turn."

"Okay," she said.



In the meantime, Petter pulled the lever that made the tank turn right and crossed his fingers that it wouldn't go completely wrong.

The Panther slowly swung around, and he watched anxiously through the periscope: wall, wall, wall, courtyard! Petter sighed with relief when the tank avoided crashing into the fortress wall for the moment, but they still weren't heading for the exit—oh no ... a car!

Petter yanked desperately on the left lever, but the sluggish metal cat couldn't turn in time. The whole tank jolted violently as it rolled straight over the car, crushing it flat like an empty tin can.

“Oops.”

“What was that?” Hanna asked.

“Another reason for them to be angry with us. How's Sara?”

“She's okay now.”

“Yes,” Sara said. “I-it just got so n-noisy. What was it you said I should do?”

“Use the periscopes to look for the exit!”

“Okay.”

Petter smiled with relief. Sara was back in action. He returned to his own periscope.

“Damn it!”

With a crash, the cannon smashed through the wall of a building!

Before Petter could even think, the rest of the tank plowed straight through the entire wall. He grabbed the levers—but where should he turn? All he could see in the periscope was splintered wood, furniture, shelves, walls and other things collapsing and slowly being crushed under the Panther's massive, sluggish tracks.

A woman screamed and threw herself aside as the cannon crashed through her kitchen wall. Plates, pots and flower vases were pulverized as Petter rolled on. He didn't dare stop—not yet.

Petter finally breathed out in relief when the tank burst through the last wall and they were back out in the open air.

“I see the exit!” Sara shouted. “Right! Turn right!”

Petter pulled the lever, and the tank slowly turned right until he could see the exit in his own periscope. It would have been great to speed up, but did he dare shift into third gear? What if he stalled the engine? He took the chance, pressed in the clutch and moved the gear stick to third. Then he accelerated harder. Damn it! Faster! Fourth gear! The tank rolled faster and faster.

Chapter 24

On the Edge

The guards at the gate raised their machine guns and fired, but the bullets bounced off.

With a crash, the Panther smashed through the barrier and continued down the gravel road toward the harbor.



“Don’t drive toward the harbor!” Sara said. “If we end up in the water, we’ll be fish food!”

“I have to,” Petter said. “There’s sea to the left and dense forest with some houses to the right. We may be in a tank, but there’s a limit to how thick the tree trunks are before we get stuck, and if we crash through a house we could fall into a basement—we weigh forty-five tons, after all—and then we’re trapped. No, we have to stay on the road until we’re out of Årvik.”

“Just be careful,” Sara said.

After a few minutes, they rolled along the cobblestones by the harbor.

“Stop!” Sara shouted.

Petter slammed the brake pedal down. The tank stopped, and the engine coughed and sputtered before dying.

“What is it?” he shouted.

“You almost drove us into the water!”

Petter looked through the periscope. Oops. The tank was actually right on the edge.

“Weren’t you supposed to be careful?” Hanna said.

“Do you have any idea how much dirt and moisture there is on my periscope lens? I can barely see anything.”

“Don’t argue,” Sara said. “Just start it again and reverse.”

“How are our pursuers doing?” Petter asked.

“They’re walking behind us. Did you really think we drove away from them? We were only going a little faster than walking speed.”

“How are we supposed to escape?” Hanna asked. “How fast can we actually go?”

“Top speed is fifty-five kilometers per hour,” Petter said. “In seventh gear.”

“So they can easily follow us in a car?” Hanna said. “And call Trondheim for reinforcements and blow us off the road? What was your plan after that, exactly?”

“The plan takes shape as we go,” Petter replied.

“Right now we’re neither going nor driving,” Sara said. “We’re standing right on the edge of the quay, surrounded by angry soldiers.”

“Maybe we should surrender,” Hanna suggested. “I don’t think Papa is going to—”

“No, we can’t,” Petter said. “Even if he forgave you and me, Sara would be arrested again. Besides, Klaus isn’t the one in charge now—it’s Hitler. I doubt he’ll forgive anything at all.”

“Can we ask someone for help?” Sara asked.

“Hm, help …” Petter thought for a moment before breaking into a huge grin. “That’s actually a brilliant idea!”

He switched seats to the radio operator’s position, also at the front of the tank but to the right of the driver, on the other side of a wall of instruments and radio equipment. There he plugged his headphones into a new socket, pressed a button and brushed the dust off the radio box.

“And what’s the idea?” Sara asked.



“My uncle works in the resistance, and they have a military radio. They’re always listening—and I know which frequency they use!”

Chapter 25 Radio Årvik

Petter turned the frequency dial to 7.2. Or was it 7.3? Static hissed in the headphones. He decided on the latter.

“Hanna, I’ve never used this kind of radio before, and the buttons are labeled in German. Which one do I use to talk?”

“That one, I think,” she said, pointing to the button marked Sprechtaste. “That means talk button. I think you have to hold it down while you speak.”

Petter held the button and cleared his throat.

“H-hello? This is Petter Hansen. I need to speak to Uncle Henrik. It’s very important.”

He released the button, but heard only static.

“Try again?” Hanna suggested.

Petter pressed the button again.

“Hello? Th-this is Petter Hansen. Seriously. I need to talk to Henrik. It’s about the Germans here in Årvik.”

He released the button and waited. Static again, but then ...

“... Petter? Seriously?” It was Uncle Henrik’s voice! A wave of relief washed over him.

“Good to hear your voice, Uncle!”

“You idiot! Why the hell are you calling our radio and using our names! This is a secret frequency! If the Germans are listening now, we’re finished. Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ve already caused your parents? Next time I get my hands on you, I’ll beat you senseless! Get the hell home. Over and out!”

Static.

“Uh ...” Petter cleared his throat, trying not to look at Hanna’s wide, shocked eyes. “But Uncle, you’ve got a huge chance to take the Germans today. You have weapons and about fifty men, right? We can attack the fortress and take our town back! Over.”

“You ... you ... bloody idiot!” Uncle Henrik’s voice crackled. “Don’t say we have weapons over the radio! Why not just tell the Germans all our secrets while you’re at it, eh? Like the dirty magazines you keep under your mattress?”

“Dirty magazines?” Hanna whispered. “What’s that?”

“Shh,” Petter said.

“Don’t you shush me!” the radio barked. “I’ll strangle you, you little larva!”



“Uncle, listen. We can do this. I promise. Just mobilize everyone and come to the fortress. Over.”

“Since the Germans are probably listening anyway, why not,” Uncle Henrik replied. “We might as well die today as tomorrow. Get it over with. Lord, what has my brother done to deserve a sheep like you for a son? Go home! Over and out.”

“B-but we have a tank,” Petter said. “Over.”

“... A what? Over.”

“A tank. We have a German Panther in the harbor. I don’t think they have any weapons that can stop us. If you help, we can take the fortress and free all the prisoners, I’m sure of it. Over.”

“Listen here, Petter ... I know you got a concussion yesterday, but there are limits to how much you can blame on that. There is not a chance in hell you’re driving around in a damn Panther. Now I think my nephew has finally lost it. Park your fantasy vehicle and go home ... over.”

“B-but I’m telling the truth!” Petter said. “Just come down to the quay and see. That’s all we’re asking. Over.”

“Who is ‘we’? Over.”

“Me, Sara, and Hanna, the commander’s daughter. Over.”

“You’re driving around in a German tank with two girls, and one of them is a Nazi? Did I hear that right? Over.”

“Two girls, yes, but only her father is a Nazi. Hanna’s okay. She helped me free Sara. You remember Sara, right? She’s had dinner with us many times. Over.”

“... That sounds so wild I don’t know what to believe,” the radio crackled. “Fine. We’ll come down to the harbor and take a look. But I swear, if you’re lying, boy ... God help you! Over and out.”

“Thank you, Uncle. Bring weapons! Over and out.”

Petter smiled with relief at Hanna. “Help is on the way.”

“Dirty magazines, huh?” she said slyly. “I think I know what that means.”

“No, no, they’re just magazines with jokes and stuff.” Petter wiped sweat from his forehead. “Seriously, there aren’t pictures of ... I mean ... just jokes, okay?”

“Aha.” She didn’t look convinced.

“Danger!” Sara shouted. “The soldiers from the fortress are coming with something—I think it’s a cannon.”

Chapter 26

Panzerbüchsen

“A what?” Petter climbed up quickly and looked through Sara’s periscope.

Sure enough, they were rolling something that looked like a small cannon on two large wheels.



“Damn!” Petter dropped back into the gunner’s seat, trying to think.

“Do you know what it is?” Hanna asked.

“Yes. I’ve seen it in my father’s magazines.” He sighed. “It’s a Panzerbüchse. It can fire large rounds that can punch through armor.”

“B-but our armor is thick enough, right?” Sara said. “They can’t hurt us … can they?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Hanna snapped. “Aren’t you the expert? You’ve known everything about tanks up until now.”

Petter just shook his head.

The hull rang out—first shot.

“Good God,” he whispered, staring at the metal where the sound had come from. No hole. Not yet.

“They’re reloading!” Sara said.

Another bang against the hull. Still no hole.

“They’re moving the cannon to a new position,” Sara said.

“A new position …” Petter murmured. “Okay, the armor was too thick there, so where would they …” He slapped his forehead. “Of course! The engine. The armor is thinnest there!”

“Can’t we just drive away from the cannon?” Sara asked.

“No. The engine and thin armor are at the rear. If we turn our back to escape, they’ll have a clear shot. And if they hit the engine, we’re finished.”

“But without the Panther,” Hanna said, “your uncle and his men can still beat the soldiers?”

“No, they don’t stand a chance. The Germans are better trained and better armed. If we can’t help, the resistance will be massacred.”

“And we lured them straight into a trap,” Sara said.

“What if we reverse away?” Hanna suggested. “Then they can’t hit us from behind.”

“We only have one reverse gear,” Petter said. “Top speed is four kilometers an hour. Hopeless. They’ll just roll the cannon past us and shoot at will. We’re too slow.”

“They’re almost ready now,” Sara said, peering through a periscope.

“What if we put our rear toward the sea?” Hanna asked. “We’re at the harbor, right? Then they can’t roll the cannon behind us.”

Another shot rang out, but the engine still roared.

“Th-that’s a brilliant idea!” Petter said.

“Yes,” Sara said. “Let’s just hope it’s not too late, and that we can turn in time.”

Petter jumped back into the driver’s seat and restarted the engine.



“Okay, Sara,” he said into the microphone, glancing up at her. “Guide me away from the edge of the quay and help me turn the tank all the way around, okay?”

“Aye aye!” Sara said, peering out. “Reverse first.”

Petter pressed the heavy clutch and put the tank in reverse, slowly backing away from the water.

“Good,” Sara said. “Keep reversing, but turn left at the same time.”

Petter did as she said.

“Okay. Forward to the right … now a bit back to the left … forward to the right again … and now back to the left … Stop!”

Petter released the controls, took a breath, and checked his own periscope. He was facing the forest across the road. A dozen soldiers stood talking.

“Our rear is toward the sea now,” Sara said. “Right on the edge of the quay. They started moving the cannon when we turned, but now they’re just standing there scratching their heads.”

“Okay, so it worked,” Petter said hopefully.

“But now they’re trying something else,” Sara said.

Petter sighed. “What?”

“Hand grenades. They’re bringing a whole crate. Didn’t you say grenades could destroy our tracks?”

“Yes …” Petter sighed. “And we can’t reverse out of this one.”

Chapter 27

Reinforcements

Shots rang out again outside, several in quick succession, followed by loud screams.

“He’s been shot!” Sara cried. “The soldier carrying the crate of grenades fell! He’s lying on the ground, not moving.”

“Shot?” Petter said. “By who?”

“Your uncle, maybe?” Hanna said as more shots and shouts echoed.

“More soldiers are falling,” Sara said. “Including the two by the cannon. The rest are running back toward the fortress now. I see men coming out of the forest with rifles, shotguns, and … uh … pitchforks and clubs.”

“Excellent,” Petter said. “That must be the resistance.”

“They’re taking over the cannon,” Sara said, “and turning it toward the fortress. Some of the men are heading toward us, others are picking up the grenades.”

“Now we can work together,” Petter said, “and use the Panther to fire on the fortress.”

“B-but my parents,” Hanna said desperately. “They could be hurt!”



Petter looked at her, thinking for the first time how devastating all this had been for Hanna and her family.

“Your mother hasn’t done anything wrong,” he said. “But your father … he might be captured.”

“Just like he captured my parents,” Sara said.

“Yes,” Hanna said softly. “I understand, but … p-please don’t hurt them.”

Petter and Sara exchanged glances.

“Maybe they’ll surrender,” Sara suggested. “They’ve already lost the tank, the cannon, and a crate of grenades. And now armed men are coming out of the forest. They must see they’re about to lose.”

“No,” Petter said. “They won’t give up that easily. They’ll try to defend themselves inside the fortress and shoot anyone who enters … but we could bombard them from here. We could tear the whole fortress down if we wanted.”

“No!” Hanna said firmly. “If we do that, Mama and Papa could die.”

“My parents too,” Sara said. “So no—but what about a warning shot? To show we’re serious, and that hiding behind walls won’t help.”

“That’s an idea,” Petter said. “Either way, we can start by rolling closer.”

Petter shifted into first gear and turned right, accelerating. A minute later, the fortress appeared in the dirty periscope.

“We’re in firing range now,” he said.

“The men from the forest are walking beside us, waving,” Sara said. “I think they want to talk.”

“Have all the soldiers retreated into the fortress?” Petter asked.

“Yes.”

“Great—fresh air at last.” Petter stopped the tank, put it in neutral, climbed up past Sara, unlocked the hatch, and opened it.

Chapter 28 The Attack on the Fortress!

When he stuck his head up through the hatch, the daylight was blinding, and lovely, fresh air filled his lungs.

He shaded his eyes with his hand and studied the area around the tank carefully. When he was sure the Germans were actually gone, he waved to the people outside. Among them was his uncle, Henrik.

“Petter!” he shouted. “What the hell are you doing up in a German Panther?”

“Oh, you know,” Petter replied breezily. “You people in the resistance are so slow—I figured I’d show you how to kick Nazis in the butt.”

“You brag worse than your father,” Henrik said. “Can you really drive that thing?”



“Drive?” Petter said. “Of course. We’re a crew of three—would’ve been better with five—but we’re doing the best we can. We can shoot, too. Want to see?”

“Can you hit the fortress?”

“One moment,” Petter said.

He climbed down, plugged the headset cable into the box by the gunner’s seat, sat down, and looked expectantly at Hanna.

“Just one shot,” he said. “Can you help me? And then we can aim at a place where we won’t hurt anyone.”

Hanna nodded slowly.

“Where do you think we can aim so no one gets hurt?” Petter asked.

“What about the nearest tower?” Sara suggested, peering at the fortress through a periscope. “There’s no guard in it now.”

“Yes, with no guard at the top, it can be empty,” Hanna said. “Inside the tower it’s only storage for food, weapons, and things like that.”

And if someone is standing nearby,” Petter said, “they’ll probably run away when they hear the shell hit the wall.”

“All right,” Hanna said. “But can you really use the cannon?”

“I think so,” Petter said. “The hardest part will be loading.” Petter pulled the lever that opened the breech. A metal block inside the turret slid aside with a clunk.

“This is where we put the shell,” he said, pointing at the opening. “And Hanna, then you have to help me. The shells are very heavy.”

“How heavy?”

“Well … twenty kilos, maybe twenty-five.”

“Donnerwetter,” Hanna exclaimed.

“Yeah, we really shouldn’t drop them on our toes, let’s put it that way.”

He laid his hands on the shell in the nearest rack on the floor. It was marked PzGr. 39—the armor-piercing type, if he remembered correctly. It would make a gigantic hole if they could just hit.

“We can absolutely move twenty-five kilos a meter or two,” he said encouragingly. “We’re not weaklings.”

Hanna grabbed on too, took a breath, and together they managed to lift the shell up. It felt like carrying a small planet! They panted and struggled. Hanna’s face was bright red by the time they finally shoved the shell into the breech.

“Excellent,” Petter said and locked the breech. He settled into the gunner’s seat and peered through the optical sight mounted by the cannon. He began turning a wheel, stamping on a pedal, and pulling a lever. The turret’s mechanisms made it rotate slowly into the right position. He had to try a bit, but at last he got the tower centered in the sight.

“Okay,” Petter said and drew a breath. “Fire!”

Petter pressed the button with the word Abzug scratched into the metal beside it. Nothing …

“It doesn’t work!” Petter cried in despair and pounded the button.

“Should it be set to aus?” Hanna asked, pointing at a lever marked Sicherung ein.

Of course—the safety! Petter pulled the lever, looked through the sight again, and pressed Abzug once more.

With an enormous BOOM the entire tank shook as if there were an earthquake. The cannon’s breech slammed back, and a hatch opened underneath where the empty casing dropped out. Smoke and dust in the turret made Petter and Hanna cough, but he kept staring, fascinated, through the sight.



The shell blasted a huge hole in a cloud of plaster and stone dust! And as if that weren't enough, the rest of the wall began to split with massive cracks. Seconds later, the entire tower collapsed. Half of it slid over the edge of the cliff and fell into the sea. They could hear the resistance cheering outside.

"Nice hit," Sara said. "If I'd been inside the fortress, I would've given up right about now."

Petter climbed up to the hatch again and stuck his head out.

"Like that?" he said, trying to hide how proud he was.

His uncle stood there, shocked, gaping with eyes wide open. At last he shook his head as if waking from a dream and put two fingers in his mouth. After a loud whistle, even more men emerged from the woods.

"Come on," Henrik said. "Roll with us over to the entrance."

Chapter 29

The White Flag

"Wait," Petter said, shading his eyes from the sun. "They're coming out instead."

From the fortress entrance, soldiers came strolling out with their hands in the air. Klaus, Hanna's father, walked first, waving a white flag—an actual white shirt tied to a long stick.

"We surrender," Klaus said when he reached them. "Who is your leader?"

Henrik flicked a startled glance up at Petter before spitting on the ground and looking back at Klaus.

"Well ... that would actually be me."

Klaus put his hand on the pistol at his belt, and the three nearest resistance men cocked their shotguns, took a step forward, and aimed.

"Do you want to die?" Uncle Henrik asked.

"No. I'm only handing over my weapon—from one officer to another."

Henrik stood thinking for a few seconds, then lowered the shotguns with a gesture and nodded to Klaus.

The German commandant drew the pistol from its holster, turned it around, and held it out to Henrik grip-first.

Henrik took the pistol.

"You have taken the fortress and captured my men," Klaus said. "But we have contacted Trondheim by radio. They are sending soldiers here. You are ... maybe fifty men? Even with a Panther, you will lose. In the end."

"Yes," Henrik said, "but in the meantime we will take every document, weapon, and piece of equipment you have for the resistance. And we will free all the prisoners here and send them to Sweden."

Petter climbed all the way out of the hatch and sat on top of the turret, breathing out in relief. Finally it was over.

A few seconds later, Hanna stuck her head up.

"Papa ...," she said.

Klaus's face turned red. "So eine Tochter!"

"Es tut mir leid, Papa," Hanna said. "Bitte sei nicht böse mit mir."

"Du bist nicht mehr meine Tochter." Klaus spat on the ground and turned his back on her.

"What did he say?" Petter asked.

Tears ran down Hanna's cheeks. She put a hand over her eyes and sobbed.



“Hanna ...” Petter didn’t know what to say or do, and she just shook her head and ducked back down into the Panther.

“Hey, Uncle,” Petter said. “You speak German—what were they talking about?”

Henrik looked up at his nephew. “He’s furious. Said she isn’t his daughter anymore.”

“But ... what is she supposed to do then?”

“Oh, we’ll find a cell for her,” Henrik said. “Then it’ll be the Germans’ problem when they get here.”

“No, you can’t ...” Petter stopped. He felt there was something else—something very important—he had forgotten. He scanned the ranks of German soldiers. Yes ...

“Klaus?” he asked. “Where is Hitler?”

Klaus didn’t say a word, only stared down at the ground.

Petter sighed. Of course Hitler had slipped away in the heat of the fight. Coward.

“Hitler!” Uncle Henrik said. “What are you babbling about? Do you really think Adolf Hitler himself cares about some tiny backwater like Årvik? He has more important things to do—in Berlin. Why would he be here?”

“Because of ... the bomb,” Petter whispered, mostly to himself. He sprang up and stared out over the water, and there ... a huge submarine was slowly gliding out of the cave beneath the fortress—a submarine on its way to London with the biggest bomb in the world.

Chapter 30

Submarine Under Fire!

Petter slipped back down through the Panther’s hatch.

“Hey, you two! A submarine is sailing out of the cave under the fortress. Hanna, do you remember what’s on board?”

She wiped the tears from her cheek and nodded. “The bomb.”

“The atomic bomb,” Petter said. “The one that can kill everyone in all of London!”

“Everyone?” Sara cried, horrified. “In the whole city?”

“Yes,” Hanna said sadly. “It’s awful.”

“We can’t let that happen!” Petter’s thoughts whirled. “What can we do? Can we ... sink it?”

“Are you insane?” Sara said. “It’s a gigantic submarine with soldiers and torpedoes.”

“Listen, we’re sitting in a Panther!” Petter said. “It has one of the biggest cannons in the world and shells made specifically to punch through armor. The hull of a submarine is much thinner than what the Panther was built to shoot at.”

“But it’s moving,” Sara said. “It’s not standing still like the tower.”

“And there are people inside,” Hanna protested. “The captain is an old friend of Papa’s, from Berlin. I have eaten dinner with him, shaken his hand, greeted him. And he is the f-father of my best friend in Berlin. W-we still write letters to each other!”

“Yes, but ...” Petter said. “Remember what they said about the bomb.”

“I haven’t forgotten!” Hanna shook her head desperately. “But I can’t be part of killing Heinrich! Killing the father of my best friend!”

“The submarine is sailing slowly,” Sara said, peering through a periscope, “but soon it will be too far away. If what you’re saying is true, I think we should shoot.”



“London has eight million inhabitants,” Petter said gravely. “If they detonate the bomb in the harbor, everyone will die. Old people, children, even tiny babies—people who have nothing to do with the war at all. They aren’t soldiers. They don’t deserve to die.”

“No one deserves to die,” Hanna muttered.

“Yes, the crew in the submarine might die if we shoot,” Petter said. “War is horrible, but surely it’s better that a few die than millions? And the submarine isn’t far away, so even if it sinks, some might manage to swim ashore. At least they have a chance—and that’s more than what they intend to give the people of London.”

Hanna nodded slowly.

“All right,” she said. “The bomb is too big. It must be stopped.”

“Okay,” Petter said. “Then we all agree.”

“The submarine is gliding out toward the sea,” Sara said. “Slowly, but it’s getting farther and farther away. Hurry!”

Petter opened the cannon’s breech, bent down, and laid his hands on a shell. Hanna grabbed on with him. With an effort, they lifted it up and into the cannon. Petter closed the breech and sat down in the gunner’s seat.

He peered through the optical sight and began turning the wheel and pulling the levers. The turret rotated slowly toward the sea until the submarine slid into the line of fire.

“Okay,” Petter said. “I’m aiming a little above and past the submarine. That’s how you aim with a slingshot, at least, when something is moving … okay … Fire!”

A loud BOOM, and the whole tank shook as if it had been struck by God’s hammer!

Petter put his hand over his mouth and nose to keep the dust and smoke out as he stared like a man possessed through the sight. The smell of gunpowder stung his nose.

A huge splash, and a pillar of water shot up toward the sky—right in front of the submarine.

“Damn it!” Petter shouted, slamming his fist against the hull.

“Miss?” Hanna asked.

“Miss … one more time! Now I know which mark to aim at!”

Hanna let out a heavy sigh.

“The shot scared everyone outside,” Sara said. “Even the resistance are running.”

“Well,” Petter said as he and Hanna grabbed another shell. “We didn’t have time to warn them.” They heaved it into place and closed the breech.

“Someone is climbing out of the top of the submarine!” Sara shouted.

“Maybe they’re surrendering?” Hanna suggested. “Are they waving a white flag?”

“Absolutely not!” Sara shouted. “They’re swinging some kind of cannon on deck toward us.”

“The deck gun!” Petter exclaimed as he sat down again. “They’re going to shoot back!”

“Is it dangerous?” Sara asked.

“Definitely!”

Chapter 31

Panther Under Fire!



A loud explosion made the whole Panther shake—it wasn't just the feeling of a shot hitting, like with the anti-tank rifle, but as if a huge bomb had gone off inside the hull.

Sara closed her eyes and folded her hands. "Shema Yisrael. Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad."

Petter swallowed his panic and cranked the cannon into a new position, based on the last miss. He tried to keep his head and not just hammer the fire button. He had to take the time to aim properly—there was no time for another miss!

In the optical sight he could just make out the crew firing another shell.

It came straight toward them, and Petter clenched his teeth.

Another explosion shook the tank violently! Smoke and dust made it hard to see, but Petter saw enough. The submarine slid into the new line of fire. Now or never! He pressed the button.

BOOM!

Petter held his breath as he stared. A tremendous crash was followed by a gigantic explosion at the rear of the submarine!

"Hit!" he shouted as yellow flames licked up toward the sky. The submarine listed, and the men at the deck gun lost their footing. One of them slid off the deck and into the sea.

Sara cheered up in the commander's seat. She had seen what happened too. "We did it!" she shouted. "It's sinking. It's really sinking!"

"What about the crew?" Hanna asked.

Sara drew a breath, fell completely silent, and stared seriously through the periscope.

"The ones who were firing the gun are already swimming toward shore," she said. "Some are climbing out from the top of the submarine too and jumping into the water."

"Good," Hanna said, quietly shaking her head. "But not everyone will make it."

Petter gave her a worried look.

"I understand it must have been hard for you," he said.

"It's okay," Hanna said. "We saved millions, didn't we?"

"I think so," Petter said.

"Y-you think?" Hanna said, looking at him with clear, frightened eyes.

"No," he said quickly. "I'm absolutely sure!"

She nodded and gave a small smile. "Germany is my home, and I will always love my country, but it is wrong to kill so many. I'm glad we stopped the bomb."

Petter leaned forward and gave her a hug. Hanna flinched at once and seemed unsure what to do, but in the end she put her arms around him and hugged back.

"What a team we are," Petter said, before turning to Sara. "Without you, we never would have managed to drive out of the fortress. I would have crashed into the wall eventually, and not even a Panther would have survived that kind of driving."

Sara snapped a military salute with her hand to her forehead, and Petter saluted back. Just like when they played war—but this wasn't play anymore ...



The radio crackled.
“Panther Battalion, hello? Can you hear me? Over.”

Chapter 32

Final Message

Petter sat down in the radio operator’s seat and plugged in the headphones.
“Yes, hello. This is Pett—no, this is codename Bagheera from the Panther Battalion. We hear you. Over.”
“This is … uh … codename … Baloo,” the voice said. Obviously Uncle Henrik.
“Good work with that submarine. I’m impressed. Over.”
“Thanks. What happens now? Over.”
“We’re freeing all the prisoners in the fortress, including Sara’s parents. They send their love and say they are very proud of her. We’ll help them and all the other prisoners across to Sweden, but it will take time. The Germans called Trondheim before we managed to take over the radio, so first we have to find good hiding places for everyone. German soldiers will be here within an hour, and they may have mentioned you by name. It isn’t safe for you in Arvik anymore. You have to go into hiding. Over.”

Petter sighed. Yes—what could he say to that? Could he really not go home to Mom and Dad anymore? What was he supposed to do then …

“Baloo …” he said. “I want to try something … drive to Sweden with Sara in this Panther, if that’s okay with her and with you. There we can be safe until the war is over. Over.”

“That’s a insane plan—no surprise coming from you … but maybe not as stupid as your plans usually are. It’ll take you about fifteen hours to drive there, and it isn’t easy to stop a Panther, especially when the Germans aren’t prepared. Maybe you’ll manage it, and I’ll make sure Sara’s parents come later.”

Petter glanced up at Sara. She smiled with shining eyes, nodded, and gave him a thumbs-up.

“Can I come too?” Hanna asked.

“Are you sure?” Petter said.

“My father made it clear he never wants to see me again. I—I am … unwanted, so yes. I’m sure.”

Petter held down the talk button.

“Hanna is coming too. Then this is goodbye. Tell Mom and Dad that I love them, and that I just had to do … everything I did today. I hope they can forgive me. Over.”

“Relax, boy. They’ll be the proudest parents in the world when they hear it all. Good luck on the trip to Sweden, and … long live the Panther Battalion!”

“Thanks,” Petter said, smiling. “And long live the King and country.”

Signing off. Out.



Historical facts connected to the book

The Holocaust was the genocide of Jews during the Second World War. This is an important theme in the book and the reason the story is set in November 1942. It was in October/November that year that the Nazis ordered the police to arrest and deport Norwegian Jews—at first only men, but gradually everyone, including children. Those who were taken were sent to concentration camps. The most infamous was Auschwitz in Poland, where one million Jews were killed during the war. Of the approximately 2,100 Jews in Norway when the war began, 770 were sent to these camps, and most of them died there. The rest fortunately managed to escape to Sweden.

The Panther tank was developed in 1942 and put into service by Germany the following year. It weighed about 45 tons, had a powerful 75 mm gun, sloped armor, and good mobility. A Panther could shoot accurately at long distances and was well protected against enemy fire. There is no documentation that Panther tanks were in Norway during the war. But if there was a Panther there, it would have had to be one of the prototypes produced in the autumn of 1942. Perhaps it was sent as a gift to Klaus from his good friend Hitler? The book's descriptions of the Panther's appearance and use are intended to be as accurate as possible. About 6,000 of these tanks were produced during the war. The author's primary source is the 2022 book "Panther Tank" by David Doyle.

Arvik is a fictional coastal village along the Trondheim Fjord. In the book, the Nazis have built a small but secret submarine bunker there, well hidden and protected beneath a fortress. The Nazis began building a large submarine bunker in Trondheim called Dora 1 in May 1941, but it was not completed until July 1943. By then it had room for seven submarines, and Trondheim became the main base for the Nazis' 13th U-boat Flotilla. The Trondheim Fjord was well suited for submarines because it was both well protected and deep. On July 24, 1943, Dora 1 was bombed by American bombers.

Adolf Hitler was the leader of Germany during the Second World War. He ruled the country as a dictator and made decisions that led to war and immense suffering. He was responsible for the persecution and murder of millions of Jews during the Holocaust. There is no evidence that he visited Norway during the war. He took his own life in 1945 when he realized Germany had lost.

The atomic bomb was developed by the United States during the Second World War and used to destroy two Japanese cities—Hiroshima and Nagasaki—in 1945. This led Japan to surrender and brought the war to a final end. The development of the bomb was called the Manhattan Project. It began in 1942 and was led by Robert Oppenheimer, sometimes called "the father of the atomic bomb." The Nazis also tried



to develop atomic bombs during the war, and heavy water from Norway was important in that work. A sabotage operation that blew up and destroyed the production plant at the Vemork power station on February 27, 1943, became famous. Two films and a TV series have been made about it. The Germans never managed to build nuclear weapons during the war—but what if they had? Who would have won the Second World War then?

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