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Wolf Winter

Written by Cecilia Ekback

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WOLF WINTER

CECILIA EKBÄCK



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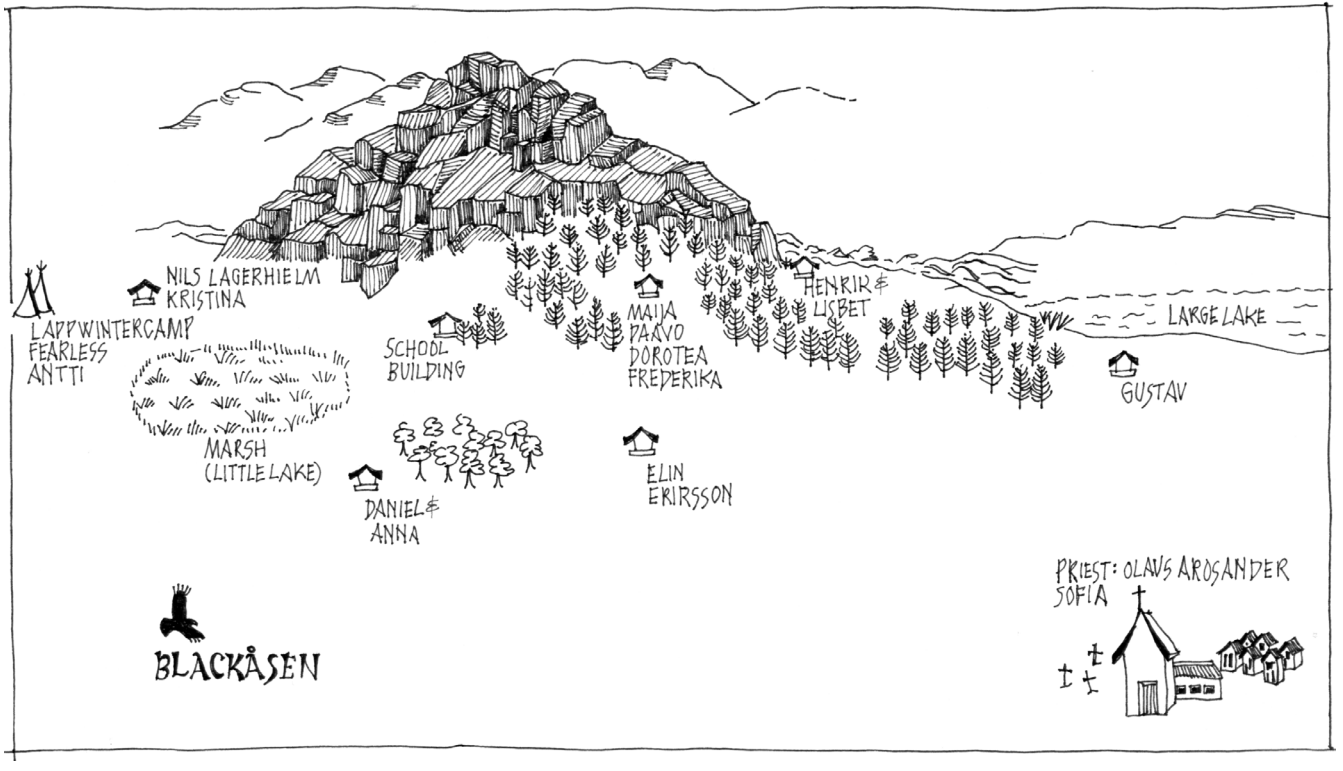
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BLACKÅSEN

PART ONE



Swedish Lapland, June 1717

'But how far is it?'

Frederika wanted to scream. Dorotea was slowing them down. She dragged behind her the branch she ought to be using as a whip, and Frederika had to work twice as hard to keep the goats moving. The morning was bright; white daylight sliced the spruce tops and stirred up too much colour. Frederika was growing hot. There were prickles on her back beneath the dress. She hadn't wanted to go, and now the goats didn't want to, either. They leapt to the left or right in among the trees and tried to run past them back towards the cottage. The only sounds were those of a tree shifting, of a hoof striking stone and the constant bleating of the stupid goats.

'Only poor people have goats,' she had said to her mother that same morning.

They were sitting on the wooden porch of their new home on the side of Blackåsen Mountain. In front of them, bugs flitted above the grassy slope. There was a small stream at the base of the hill and beyond that, a field. Enclosing all this was forest – jagged black spears against pink morning sky.

'We'll sow turnips up there.' Frederika's mother, Maija, nodded towards the barn. 'That's a good place with sun.'

‘At least cows and sheep manage on their own in the forest. Goats are a lot of work for nothing.’

‘It’s just until your father and I have built a fence around the field. Take them to that glade we saw on our way here. It’s not far.’

The barn door opened and Dorotea hopped out. The door clapped shut behind her.

‘It will be fine,’ her mother said in a low voice as Dorotea ran down the slope.

Frederika wanted to say that here, nothing could be fine. The forest was too dark. There was spidery mould among the twigs and on the ground beneath the lowest branches there were still patches of snow, hollow blue. She wanted to say that this cottage was smaller than the one they had lived in, in Ostrobothnia. It was lopsided and the land unkempt. Here was no sea, no other people. They shouldn’t have left. Things hadn’t been that bad. Hadn’t they always managed? But the wrinkle between her mother’s eyes was deeper than usual. As though she might want to say those things, too, and so Frederika had said nothing.

‘But how far is it?

Frederika looked at the blonde child in the hand-me-down dress that billowed around her like a sheet on a clothes-line in wind. Dorotea was still little. Frederika was fourteen, Dorotea only six. Dorotea stumbled on the trailing hem.

‘Lift your feet when you walk and hurry,’ Frederika said.

‘But I am tired,’ Dorotea said. ‘I’m tired, I’m tired, I’m tired.’

It was going to be an awful, awful day.

They climbed higher, and the forest below them turned into a sea of deep greens and stark blues that rolled and fell until the end of the world. Frederika thought of grey lakes; of a watery sky. She thought of flat earth with sparse growth that

didn't demand much and missed Ostrobothnia so badly that her chest twisted.

The path narrowed and dipped, with many loose stones. To the left, the mountain plunged all the way into the valley far beneath.

'Walk after me,' she said to Dorotea. 'Watch where you put your feet.'

Along the base of the rock, star-shaped purple saxifrage peeked through the stones. There was a small mound of brown pellets sweating in the sunshine, spilling; a deer of some sort. Above them, growing straight out of the stone, was a small, twisted birch.

The path veered right. Frederika hadn't seen this when they came, but here the side of the mountain had burst. There was a fracture cutting deep into the rock. Lynx lived in crevices like this. Trolls also.

'Hurry,' she said to Dorotea and lengthened her steps.

There was a large boulder and another bend in the path. The trail broadened. They were back in the forest.

'I stepped on something prickly.' Her sister lifted her leg and pointed at the sole of her dusty foot.

Then Frederika sensed rather than saw it. The goats sensed it too. They hesitated and stared at her, bleating large question marks.

It was the smell, she thought. It was the same stench that lay over the yard when they slaughtered to have meat for winter. Earth, rot, faeces.

A fly buzzed into her ear and she hit at it. Further away, between tree trunks, there was light. The glade. She put her finger to her mouth. 'Shhh,' she whispered to Dorotea.

Watching where she put each foot among blueberry sprigs and moss, she walked towards the brightening. At the edge of the glade she stopped.

Tall grass sprouted in tufts. A bouquet of hawthorn butterflies skipped and danced in the air like a handful of pale flowers thrown to the wind. At the further end of the glade was a large rock. The pine trees behind grew close into a wooden wall. There was a shape beside the boulder. Yes, something had died. A deer. Or perhaps a reindeer.

Dorotea took her hand and stepped close. Frederika looked around as their mother had taught them, scanned the evenness of tree trunks for a movement or a shape. In the forest there was plenty of bear and wolf. Whatever had attacked could still be about, still be hungry after winter.

She concentrated. A woodpecker tapped. The sun burned on her scalp. Dorotea's hand was sticky, twitching in hers. Nothing else. She looked back towards the carcass.

It was blue.

She let go of her sister's hand and stepped forward.

It was a dead man there in the glade.

He stared at Frederika with cloudy eyes. He lay bent. Broken. His stomach was torn open, his insides on the grass violently red, stringy. Flies strutted on the gleaming surfaces. One flew into the black hole that was his mouth.

Dorotea screamed and at once it was upon her: the stench, the flies, the man's gaping mouth.

O Jesus, please help, she thought.

They had to get their mother. *Jesus – the goats.* They couldn't leave the goats.

She grabbed her sister's shoulders and turned her around. Dorotea's eyes were round, her mouth wide open, strings of saliva that became a bubble, then popped. She lost her breath and her mouth gawped in silence.

'Dorotea,' Frederika said. 'We must fetch Mother.'

Dorotea wrapped her arms around her, clambered up her like a cat up a tree, clawing. Frederika tried to loosen her arms. 'Shhh.'

The forest was quiet. There was no rustling; no tapping, murmuring, or chirping. No movement, either. The forest held its breath.

Her sister bent her knees as if to sit down. Frederika grabbed her hand and yanked her to her feet. 'Run,' she hissed. Dorotea didn't move. '*Run!*' Frederika yelled, and raised her hand as if to hit her.

Dorotea gasped and set off down the trail. Frederika spread her arms wide and ran towards the goats.

They flew through the forest, hooves and bare feet drumming against the ground.

Faster.

Frederika whipped the back of the last goat. She fell, knees stinging, hands scraping. *Up-up-don't-stop*. One of the goats jumped off the trail. She screamed and slapped its rear.

When they reached the pass, Frederika grabbed her sister's arm. 'We must go slow. Be careful.' Dorotea hiccuped and dry-sobbed. Frederika pinched her and Dorotea stared at her, her mouth wide open.

'I'm sorry, please, a little bit longer.' Frederika stretched out her hand. Her sister took it and they followed the goats into the pass. One step, two, three.

The rupture into the mountain seemed larger. There was a sound. It might have been breathing.

Oh, don't look. Frederika kept her eyes on her feet. Four, five, six. In the corner of her eye she saw Dorotea's naked feet on the trail beside hers, half walking, half running. Seven, eight, nine. The goats' hoofs were loud against the rocks. *Please*, she thought. *Pleasepleaseplease*.

The path slackened, twisted a little and then flattened and fell downwards and outwards and they began to run – slowly at first, then faster. Downhill now, sighting their house between the trees. Dorotea ahead of her, screaming, '*Mamma, Mamma!*'

And at last, safe in their yard. Her parents came running, her father with long strides, her mother just behind him. It was then that Frederika vomited.

Her father reached her, hauled her up by her arm. 'What is going on? What happened?'

'A man,' Frederika said and wiped her mouth, 'in the glade and he is dead.'

And then her mother swept her into her long skirts as if she would never have to emerge again.



‘We need to do something,’ Maija said.

Frederika had let go of her. Now it was Dorotea who was on her hip, fingertips on Maija’s shoulders, face in her collarbone. Holding this child was like holding no weight at all. She clung on. Like a little spider.

‘Your uncle said there were other settlers on the mountain. We need to find them,’ Maija said.

Her husband, Paavo, rubbed his forehead with his knuckle, pushed at his hat with the back of his hand, pulled it down again with two fingers. Maija’s chest tightened.

‘He belongs somewhere,’ she said. ‘This man. He belongs to someone.’

‘But which glade are you talking about? I don’t know where it is,’ Paavo said.

Maija put her nose in her younger daughter’s thin hair. Inhaled sunshine and salt. ‘I’ll go,’ she said into the hair. ‘I’ll see if I can find anyone.’

The sun doesn’t help, she thought, as if that excused him. Its glower made them seem brittle, beige quaking grass anticipating a storm.

They hadn’t seen anyone during the three days they’d been on Blackåsen, but surely, eastwards there must be others who, like them, had come from the coast. People who had been

there longer than they had. Maija walked fast. Blueberry sprigs nipped at her skirt. The sun was high; her body left no shape on the ground. She noticed her nostrils were flared. That little pull of dislike that was more and more often on her face. She wrinkled her nose, relaxed her features and slowed her pace.

'It's not his fault,' she said to herself.

She imagined her dead grandmother, Jutta, walking beside her: the snub nose, the forward-slanting forehead and the underbite, elbows lifted, as if she were wading through water. 'It's not his fault,' Jutta agreed. 'He's going through hard times.'

Hard times for everyone, Maija couldn't help thinking.

The men in Paavo's lineage were of a weaker make-up. Faint-hearted, it was often whispered back in the village. When Paavo proposed to Maija, he'd told her himself. Told her some among his family were prone to fear. It didn't bother her. She didn't believe in such a thing as destiny. And she had known the man in front of her ever since he was a long-haired boy pulling her braid.

'You are solid,' she said, and touched his temple.

Neither of them expected what was to come.

As soon as they were married, they started. The terrors. As if being wedded brought damnation down on him. At night, Paavo threw himself back and forth. He moaned. He woke up soaking wet, smelling salty of seaweed and rank like fish.

Paavo began to avoid the edge of his boat when they pulled up the nets. She tried to warn him, said, 'Don't.' But soon her husband no longer took the boat out in the brackish bay, where herring swam in big silver clouds and the backs of grey seals were oily slicks of joy. Then he decided he did not need to accompany the other men at all. His hair darkened and he cut it short. His skin became pale. He thickened. Little by little, his world shrank until he could no longer bear the sight of

water in the washbasins in the house, or the sound of someone slurping soup.

And that was when Paavo's uncle, Teppo Eronen, came to visit from Sweden last spring and said, 'Swap you your boat for my land.' Teppo sang of a country with ore in every mountain and rivers full of pearls, and it awoke in Paavo a desperate longing to leave the waters of Finland for the forests of Sweden.

Yes, Uncle Teppo wasn't the shrewdest. And he told tall stories, everybody knew that, but might there still not be some truth to what he said? After all, the Swedes had tried to possess the north for centuries. Besides, Finland was being destroyed by the war. And it might do them both good, a fresh start?

Maija's heart felt heavy. If it wasn't the Tsar's soldiers hounding their coasts, burning their villages and looting, it was the Swedes, and that's where her husband wanted to move.

'It is not easy to leave something behind, you know,' she said.

'I know that.'

'It is possible though,' she had to admit.

She put her hand to his cheek, forced him to look at her. 'Then if we go, you must promise you will not take this with you.'

His face told her what he felt. He wasn't sure a promise like that could be made. The fear might be braided in with his very fibre.

'People hang on to their past way beyond what's necessary,' she said. 'Swear you won't take it with you.'

In a burst, he promised. And she trusted him.

The walk over the ice on the throat of the Baltic Sea ought to have taken them a few days, a week at most with the snow, but wind pressed down between the two landmasses. It lashed at their eyes with grains of ice until they couldn't continue.

They dug a hole in the drifts and lay down with their daughters, as the wind ripped layer after layer of snow off them, until all that was left was the reindeer skin they clung on to. Paavo shouted in her ear. The wind cut out his words.

'What?'

'Forgive me.' He shouted again. '. . . lied . . . There was a boat . . . I couldn't go by boat.'

And then, as fast as it had angered, the wind mellowed, leaving behind blue sky, deep green ice.

But inside Maija, the wind still screamed. All those things they had left behind, and yet her husband had chosen to bring his fear.

Maija stopped to wipe her forehead with her sleeve. June warmed spruce and pine trees all the way to their cores, worked on their frozen centres until they loosened and gave and the heat could reach into the ground along their roots, to break the frost at the deep. But for June, this was hot. It was a good beginning. If it continued like this, nature would provide. Above her, a high wind tugged at the crowns. At ground level, all was still, a golden-green smell of resin and warm wood.

And then, instead of silence, there was the murmur of water. She began to walk again, head tilted, following the only timbres that were familiar in the midst of the woodland. And as the rumble of rapids became louder, she lengthened her steps, anticipated the opening; the air. She came out on to a large rock on the shore above a river and stopped. The water in front of her churned, screamed against stones and gushed down. She knew this, had seen it before, and yet she had never come across anything like it in her whole life. Once, he would have loved this, she thought. No, she could almost hear her husband say. I never liked anything like that.

She turned right, walked alongside the river torrents until they fell into a lake, faint swells on a blank surface the only signs of the violent struggle beneath. And on the south shore, about a kilometre away, there was a cottage.

The settlement lay on a grassy hill overlooking the lake. Behind the house, the forest was lofty pine, not the craggy spruce of the mountain. Maija came out in a yard surrounded by four small buildings, sheds to store wood and food for winter. There were the rhythmic whacks of an axe and she followed them towards the back of the barn. Along the wall, scythes, rakes, shovels and levers stood in a well-ordered row. She passed cages where meat must be kept to dry in early spring before the flies. Four fat graylings hung on a hook, a string through their gills, bodies still glistening, their mouths agape. This was what a homestead should look like. She hadn't said it to the others, but she'd been shocked at the poor state in which Uncle Teppo had kept his. She walked around the corner and a man looked up. His dark hair was cropped close to his skull. There was a glitter of beard on his cheeks and a scar on his upper lip that pulled his mouth aslant. He steadied the piece of wood on the chopping block and split it in one blow. He reached for another log on the ground.

'My name is Maija,' she said. 'We've taken over Eronen's land. We arrived a few days ago.'

He remained silent. His eyes lay so deep that they were like black holes under his eyebrows.

'This morning, my daughters found something – someone – dead in a glade on the top of the mountain. Frederika, my elder, said his stomach was slit.'

He stared at her.

'We don't know who he is,' she said.

The man spat on the ground and drove the axe into the block. As he walked away, his hips were stiff, as if he had to will each leg to lift. Maija took a few steps until she was standing by the chopping block. A personal thing, a chopping block. A man needed to pick one with care. This man's was long used. You could no longer see the year-rings of the tree, so destroyed was its surface with gashes. It resembled their own back home. Their new one here was still clean and white.

He returned, holding a pack. In his other hand was a rifle. He began to walk, and she assumed she was supposed to follow.

'Has something like this happened before?' she asked his back, breath in her throat.

He didn't respond. She kept her distance. He ought to have asked about her, her husband, their origins, but he didn't. Above them, the head of Blackåsen Mountain was round and soft – a loaf of bread on a tray in the sunshine.

The yard they came to at the mountain's north base was as disordered as the first man's had been tidy. Tools were scattered over the ground, a mound of planks lay along one side of the cottage, and laundry hung on a sagging clothes-line. A sheep was in the garden patch eating the weeds. There was a lethargy to it all that didn't fit with long-term survival.

A blond man came out on the porch. He was thin and his shoulders narrow. His hair grew in a crest like a fowl's.

The man beside Maija tensed. They don't know each other, Maija thought. Or they know each other and they don't like each other. He tilted his head towards her and the scar pulled his mouth large and diagonal as he spoke. 'A body on the mountain.'

'What? Who?'

'Don't know. Perhaps bring your eldest.'

The blond man opened the cottage door and said something into the opening. He was joined on the porch by a younger version of himself: the same blond wave of hair, the same bony figure, hands like large lids by his thighs.

'What did you see?' the man said. There was a greyness to his skin even though he couldn't have been more than ten years her senior. His son had a surly look on his face. Older than Frederika, perhaps sixteen–seventeen.

'I didn't,' she said. 'My daughters found him.'

The man was still looking at her.

'I am Maija,' she said.

'Henrik,' he said.

'And who did I come here with?'

'That,' he said, staring at the back of the man who had already begun to walk away, 'is Gustav.'

Henrik nodded for Maija to pass ahead of him.

'How are your daughters doing?' he asked.

'They'll be fine.'

Dorotea was still little. She would forget. And Frederika was strong.

'Where are you staying?'

'Teppo Eronen is my husband's uncle. He traded us his homestead for ours.'

'Oh,' Henrik said, with a tone that made her want to turn around to see his face.

'Well, Eronen's land is good,' he added after a while. 'It's better on the south side of the mountain than here. You'll have more sun.'

The shadow side of the mountain was full of thicket underneath the spruce trees. The ground was cool and the grass, wet. Maija pressed each foot down hard so as not to slip. Her breathing was rapid. Beneath them, the river trailed all of the

north side of the mountain and beyond, flexed through the green like a black muscle, or a snake. A snake shooting for the blue mountain chain at the horizon.

She didn't know what they might find at the top of the mountain. Frederika hadn't made much sense. But she had cried. Frederika didn't often cry.

'I thought the girls could take the goats to that glade close to the summit,' she said, as if to explain.

'There is the marsh, too,' Henrik's son said. 'But she's treacherous. Better not send girls there.'

When they reached the summit, she hesitated. Henrik passed her. His son made as if to pass her as well, but she shook her head and walked ahead of him, in.

The glade was basking in colour and light. And then, she saw the man for herself.

He was ripped from throat to genitals, the body split apart, turned inside out, shaken until what was within had collapsed and fallen out on the ground.

Behind her, Henrik's son moaned.

'Eriksson,' Henrik said.

Gustav walked to the body and knelt down.

Maija took a step to the side, her hand searching in the air for a tree trunk, something, anything.

When she looked back, Gustav's hand was on the body. 'Bear,' he said. 'Or wolf.'

'Bear?' Maija asked.

But what kind of a monster would it take to do this?

'We'll take the body to the widow,' Gustav said.

Maija thought of Dorotea, her bony chest and pouting belly, her shape still that of a baby. She thought of Frederika, the bulging vein at the base of her neck where the skin was so thin it was clear, the blue tick making her feel both joyful and

frightened. Half an hour, she thought. Half an hour's walk at most to their cottage.

'We need to track it,' she said.

The men turned to her.

'We can't have a killer bear on the loose.'

Henrik looked to Gustav.

Gustav rose. 'Fine,' he said, his mouth a twisted, black hole.

But he had shrugged.

'I'll come with you,' Maija said.

'There is no need.'

'I'll come.'

'Fine.'

'Eriksson,' Henrik's son said. 'The mountain took him.'

'What do you mean?' Maija asked.

There was a sheen on his upper lip as his blue eyes jumped from his father to her. 'The mountain is bad,' he said.

Gustav bent to open his leather satchel and took out a piece of canvas and ropes. He spread the sheet on the ground beside the body and sat on his heels. Henrik squatted beside him. After a brief hesitation, she did the same. The boy remained standing.

The three of them rolled the body on to the cloth. Heavy and spumy, it crawled and came undone in their hands. Behind her, the boy dry-heaved. Maija focused on the rim of Gustav's hat, let her hands work without looking.

'We'll wait for you at Eronen's old homestead,' Henrik said. A quick glance at Maija. 'At your homestead,' he corrected himself.

He pushed his son to get him moving and the two of them wired the ropes around their wrists and lifted. They became a flicker between tree trunks before they vanished.

Gustav hunched down. He poked with a twig in the

squashed grass. Then he rose and walked over to some mountain carnations at the side of the glade. He moved the tiny purple flowers with their black stems and emerald blades aside to look at the silvery moss beneath. At once their strong perfume was in the air, tangled with the smell of rot.

The tracks led them west down Blackåsen Mountain. At the foot of the mountain was marshland, black water, green spongy tufts.

Maija stepped on it and water welled up around her shoe, and – she waited – yes, there it was through the leather, cool between her toes, filtering up and down, becoming warm. She tried to put her feet in Gustav's footsteps. The ground smacked each time she lifted a foot. This was the kind of land that didn't know how to let go.

'Walk close to the trees,' Gustav said, without turning around.

She did as he said. Kept so close her side scraped the bark. Felt their roots under her feet in all the other that yielded. The marsh water was not always black. Sometimes it wore a large sheet of silver. Sometimes it mirrored what was above. Then the sun came out and it pretended to be blue.

On the other side of the swamp, the ground was dry, rosy with Lapp heather.

'Why did the boy say the mountain took him?' she asked.

Gustav bent down to study the twigs on the ground.

The sun edged over the sky. The heat changed and the air became tight. It pressed two thumbs against her temples. She would get a headache. At this time of year, light won over time. Only the change in sounds and the detachment of the sun told her that evening had fallen, and then when night had come.

'Are the tracks easy to follow?' she asked.

Gustav stopped. He waited so long before answering she assumed he wouldn't.

'Yes,' he said at last. 'He's not trying to hide.'

'How long ago?'

'The tracks are a few days old.'

He rubbed his chin. 'We'll stop here,' he said. 'The beast is long gone.'

Yet they stood for a while and stared in among the trees before them.

When they turned around, clouds were building a stack at the horizon. There would be a storm. Milk-blue and sickly yellow, the clouds swelled and stirred, like unfinished business.



‘I hate this,’ the priest said out loud.

He kicked at a tree, and a branch swung and smacked him on his bare leg under the cloak. ‘Good Lord in heaven,’ he said.

He didn’t say anything more. It was his one chance that God or the bishop would have mercy on him and return him south. He had to be careful.

Here he was, roaming the forests to make sure the settlers’ names and those of their spawn were registered in the Church Book. The region had a town, at least in name. Surely newcomers ought to think to go there before they set out to make their mark on the wilderness. And thinking you could make a mark on these wastelands – preposterous.

He was overcome by a yawn and felt how tired he was. It was most likely evening – impossible to tell time with all this light. He chose a large spruce tree and crawled on all fours in beneath it, wrapped his cloak closer, listened to the ticking and croaking in the forest and didn’t like it. He should have known to dress better. Summer here was summer only in name. Though the cool weather meant fewer mosquitoes. He could pretend he had not heard of the new settler family on their way to Eronen’s old homestead, he thought. There was an owl’s call, and he tensed. Nothing more.

Better to think of singing stone towers. Of natives in bright

wide trousers and turbans shuffling around them in pointed shoes. Of dinner conversations with the young King that could at any point end with their horses racing down roads gleaming in the moonlight. 'I dare you.' 'You dare me?' As the court priest, he had been invincible, or so he'd thought. But he had paid for thinking thus. The Church had seen to that.

There was a violent cracking of branches. The priest sat up, his back pressed against the tree. Something tore through the forest before him. There was a rumbling growl and a black shape between the trunks, then silence.

An animal.

He must have fallen asleep.

Elk?

No, it ran too fast.

When all had been silent for a long time, he stood up. He wasn't going to be able to sleep more, so he might as well continue his journey. He glanced over his shoulder twice as he walked, but there were only trees.

At a bend in the river, he became uncertain of the way and slowed down. He had been at Blackåsen one time only for the Catechetical meeting – pointless affair – the peasants dressed in their best rags, hair combed with sugar water, ears scrubbed hot and red. Him noting in the Church Book while focusing on producing beautiful handwriting: *Some reasoning, Lazy, Weak intelligence*. He couldn't remember having passed this place. Here, the river had slowed. It more resembled a tarn than something that was alive and flowing. There was an islet just by the shore, covered with shrubs. The water was murky, yet the outline of the islet seemed to descend and descend. He hadn't realised the river was this deep. The base of the atoll appeared made out of leaves.

One single leaf drifted in the water, just underneath the surface. It orbited around itself in the dark, as if ensnared.

He stepped backwards.

But the lake was behind him, the mountain was still ahead. It must be this way, he thought; it couldn't be far.

The small house the settlers called Eronen's lay dark in the middle of the empty yard. For all the priest knew, it might still be night. The air smelled of mud, nettles, and . . . He couldn't remember the name of the tall crimson flowers, but he could see the sticky milk inside their stems tarnishing his cloak. Then there were voices, strands of words in the air, coming from up by the outbuilding.

On stones, their outlines dark blocks in the faint light, sat three men. A fourth man was standing up and beside him, a woman. At first they didn't hear him. Then, at once, the five lifted their heads. The men got to their feet and removed their hats. Henrik, one of his sons, and the other one, the one who kept to himself, who had a limp – Gustav. The new settler was thick and slow. The woman stood without moving.

'What's this?' the priest said. 'A little parish meeting?'

'No, no,' Henrik said. 'Not without you.'

'I am the priest,' he said to the newcomers, 'your priest, Olaus Arosander. I have come to register you.' He found he was speaking to the woman. She was small, but her chin was lifted. Though young, her hair was a blonde grey or white, but that could have been the light. Beside her, the new man's hat was going round in his hands. Round and round.

'Eriksson is dead,' Henrik said.

The priest stopped sharp. 'Eriksson?'

'We found him on top of the mountain,' Henrik said. 'By the Goat's Pass.'

The priest felt his insides fall, fall from the top of the mountain and all the way down. He felt giddy. Then unwell.

'What happened?' he asked.

'Bear,' Gustav said. 'Perhaps wolf. Tracks were old. We have been out all night.'

The woman was staring at Gustav. 'It's unusual,' she said, 'for bear or wolf to attack. Especially during summer.'

'Land isn't giving,' Gustav said. 'Predators, too, are starved.'

'What did you do?' the priest asked. 'I mean, where is he now?'

'We took him to Elin,' Henrik said.

'She was in the yard waiting for us,' his son said.

The new settler stirred. 'What do you mean? She knew?'

'There have been problems with Elin,' the boy said.

'That's your mother talking,' Henrik said.

Father and son stared at each other.

'What do we do now?' the woman asked.

'Whatever you used to do,' Gustav said. Without saying goodbye, he set off down the yard.

As the priest followed the newcomers towards the house, he heard things insist and stir in the tall grass and from the barn. Morning was coming.

He sat down on the bench inside the kitchen, took his black book from his satchel and put it on the table in front of him. He found the ink and the pen, wet his fingers and touched its tip. They stood in a half-circle before him. Both daughters had their mother's large grey eyes and blonde hair. They had their father's round cheeks, though, and the same solemnity – something knotted about their mouths.

'I will need your names. You are all baptised, of course?'

The man nodded.

‘My name is Maija,’ the woman said. ‘My father’s name was Harmaajärvi. This is my husband, Paavo Ranta. And this is Frederika and Dorotea.’ She touched each daughter’s shoulder in turn.

The priest wrote the names with large letters.

‘Dates of birth?’

Again it was the woman who answered: ‘Me, January 1680, Paavo in August the same year. Frederika was fourteen this March and Dorotea, six in April.’

‘From?’

‘Ostrobothnia. In Finland. All of us.’

Finns. Of course. He saw it now – the pale complexion, the profusion of moles. ‘F-i-n-n-s,’ he spelled aloud. ‘These are your offspring?’

‘Yes,’ she said – the Finn woman.

‘And you will farm this land?’

‘Yes,’ she said again. ‘Though I am earth-woman by training – midwife. I might be able to help the women here in their difficult times.’

The priest noted it down, closed the Church Book and placed it on the table in front of him. The Finn woman nodded and her older daughter put a pan on the fire. The man handed the priest a ladle filled with water.

He drank until it was empty.

So Eriksson was dead.

The first time the priest had met Eriksson was on Blackåsen’s marsh, the autumn after the priest’s arrival. The pine forest south was on fire, crackling with a smell of burning wood, millions of angry orange sparks in black smoke hurtling towards the sky. The priest had turned to run, and Eriksson was in front of him. ‘I’m clearing land,’ he said.

‘It’s forbidden,’ the priest said.

'Don't get close then.'

That was what he had been like, Eriksson. No respect. Sometimes God did take the right people.

The kitchen sizzled and smelled of fried butter and grayling. The priest's stomach rumbled.

And at once, he remembered his sudden awakening, the animal tearing through the forest. How did a bear kill a man? Strike him? Bite him? He found himself shuddering. He didn't really want to know.

The Finn woman put a plate in front of him. Fish. She cut a thick piece of bread and covered it with yellow butter and gave it to him. He nodded to her, thank you.

He grabbed the fish with both hands, bit into its side and tasted salt and charcoal. The bread was proper bread with no additions of bark or haulm.

When he had finished, he leaned back. They had rinsed the walls, scrubbed the floor with birch twigs so its wood was white. There were fresh rags around the windows.

'What will happen now?' the Finn woman asked.

She sat down opposite him. The mounting light that came in through the window turned her blonde tendrils into the gold Crown of the Righteous. 'Will you go and see her now? The widow?'

He took a cloth from his pocket and wiped his mouth. 'Of course,' he said biting down around the words.

'Then I'll come with you,' she said. 'She might need the company of another woman.'

The air was cold, but the priest was soaked with sweat. His cloak caught on twigs and branches. Elin would bury the body of her husband in a temporary grave. The coffin would be dug up and sent to him for its proper burial in the

graveyard in town in October or November, when the snow allowed for transport. This whole venture was unwarranted. He should have just said no. He stepped wrong and imagined the Finn woman sneering behind him. He slowed down until they were level and they continued in silence on the trail.

'Did you know him?' she asked.

'Eriksson? Why do you ask?'

She looked at him.

'Of course, I did,' he said, annoyed. 'Member of the congregation.'

'It's interesting, he's called by his last name.'

The priest shrugged. Eriksson was the kind of man from whom others kept their distance.

'Who was he?'

'I don't know. All of you come here fleeing someone or something, and so you avoid talking of the past.'

'We didn't,' she said after a while.

'Didn't what?'

'Flee.'

The priest looked to the sky. I like them better broken, he thought. Broken, humbled, ready to face the cross.

'How many people live here?'

'There are five settlements on and around Blackåsen Mountain. Six now, with yours.'

Six other mountains in his parish. And in the middle, an empty town.

'And the Lapps,' he added.

'The Lapps?' She sounded hesitant.

'They spend winter on Blackåsen,' he said and felt almost fatherly. 'Bring the reindeer down from the high mountains so the animals can eat. You'll meet them in church at Christmas, if not before.'

‘Henrik’s son seemed frightened,’ she said.

The children on Blackåsen were.

‘And Gustav is . . .’ she hesitated.

Well, yes. The priest, too, didn’t know what to call it. She nodded, as if he’d said something out loud.

‘Uncle Teppo didn’t tell us much about what to expect,’ she said with a little smile, as if they were sharing a joke.

‘I didn’t know your uncle. I’ve only been here a year.’

Not even. Two hundred and thirty-three days.

She was staring at him. ‘But when did our uncle leave?’ she asked.

‘If I remember rightly from the Church Books, four, five years ago.’

The priest stopped to wipe his forehead. By the side of the path a small mound of stones were built into a pyramid. In their midst, a fat stick pointed to the sky. A signpost of some sort. He wiped his hands. There were black dots in the lines of sweat on his palms. He wiped them again, put the kerchief back, and flattened his collar with two fingers.

‘What will happen to them?’ the Finn woman asked.

‘To whom?’

‘Eriksson’s wife and children.’

‘Oh. That, I don’t know,’ he said.

A lone woman with four children couldn’t manage a homestead. It would either be the poorhouse by the coast, or they’d have to go on the pauper list, the rota, spend a few days on each farm. The peasants would protest, though. Say there were already so many. He wasn’t going to talk to the widow about it now. She’d still have hope, he told himself, but knew he was procrastinating. Come winter, when they took the body down, he’d have to arrange for them to take the widow and her offspring as well.

There was a woman in among the spruce trees ahead of them. She was pale and thin. Her hair was frizzy reddish brown – it almost didn't look human. She stood with her head lifted high and waited for them to reach her.

'Elin,' the priest said.

'Please see him, before we bury him.'

He shook his head.

'I really want you to see his body,' she said.

The priest shook his head again before he realised Elin wasn't looking at him. She was looking at the Finn woman.



The long skirt of the woman in front of her brushed the trail. Henrik's son had said there had been problems with Elin. Maija thought about his father silencing him. The words had been harsh, but it hadn't been a rebuke, she thought. No, Henrik had pleaded.

Elin made a sound and said, 'It's good that you're not from here.'

'Oh,' Maija startled. 'Yes?'

Behind her, the priest stumbled.

On the porch sat four thin children, side pressed against side. Maija's breath slowed. The priest's face was indifferent. Here, man is nothing, she thought. In these lands, we will pass unnoticed.

Elin turned to her. 'Henrik said it was bear.'

'Elin,' Maija said. 'I was there. I've seen the body of your husband.'

'But did you see?' the other woman asked. She stressed the word 'see'. Pointed out there were more ways to see than one.

The priest was shifting his weight on his feet, back and forth. 'The dead must be given their rest,' he said.

'Please,' Elin said.

As they followed her towards the barn, the children on the porch still had not moved. Maija felt their eyes chill her back.

There were no animals in the barn. The silence was so present, it felt loud. The roof was full of openings through which

daylight floated to blend with dust in white, still ducts. Elin lifted the lantern off its nail on the wall. She lit it, and Maija could no longer avoid looking at the shape on the table, wrapped in canvas and tied with mucky ropes. 'Be bigger than yourself,' she had said to her daughter the other morning when her fourteen-year-old's lip trembled as she woke from a bad dream. 'For your little sister's sake, for the sake of all of us. Be bigger.'

What stupid advice. She would never give it again.

Elin handed her the lantern and turned to loosen the ropes and fold the canvas aside. Its insides were stained brown and the smell of decay struck Maija again, filled her mouth with a coppery tang – as if she tasted the man's blood. The priest covered his face with his arm. Elin tucked the canvas underneath the edges of the body. Holding together. She was trying to hold together what had once been a husband and a father, a life.

A wave of nausea or sorrow flooded Maija and she had to open her mouth wide. She handed the lantern back to Elin, took off her kerchief and tied it around her nose and mouth. The skin on the dead man's face hung loose. There was a bundled-up rag under his chin to keep his mouth closed, a stone on each eyelid. Death came in many shapes. Though bad, this was not the worst Maija had seen it.

She sensed the woman on the other side of the table. I don't know what you want me to do, she thought. Wolf attacked and . . . She stopped. Elin nodded. Maija stepped closer. With her finger, she picked Eriksson's frayed shirt out of the wound and bent to look.

'Do you have water?' she asked. 'And a cloth.'

Elin put the lantern on the table and disappeared from its circle of light. She came back with a bowl and a rag. Maija washed the dry blood off the skin on both sides of the open

cavity. She paused. She lifted Eriksson's heavy hands, first one and then the other, looked in the coarse palms. There was a small red mark, like a burn, on the side of his right index finger; otherwise nothing. She pushed what was left of his shirt up to see his shoulders and his throat. She removed the stones from his eyelids, signalled to Elin, and they pushed the body on to its side. The back of his neck was black from the blood that had settled there. But the shirt on his back was whole.

They lowered the body down. Maija lifted his right hand again to see the mark on his finger. She looked at Elin. Elin shook her head; she didn't know. No, it was an everyday wound. The kind that normally wasn't noticed. Some seeds had caught on Eriksson's shirtsleeve. Maija scraped them down into her hand. They looked almost like dry pine needles, but denser and with a greyish tint. She smelled them, and even amid the odour of death, these managed a scent fragrant enough to prickle her nose. Herbs? She took one between her front teeth and bit it. Its taste was sharp, bitter.

Elin bent to see. She took a couple of the seeds, rubbed them and smelled her fingers, then shook her head again. 'Not from here around,' she said.

Over Elin's shoulder, Maija's eyes met the priest's blue ones. She nodded to Elin and stepped away. Elin handed her the lantern and folded the canvas back over the body.

Once, back in Ostrobothnia, Maija had seen grey-legs attack. It was winter, in the middle of the day. She'd been fishing for pike through a hole in the lake ice. She tugged at the fishing line with small jerks, willed the fish to bite. There was sun. It was quiet. On the other side of the lake, a deer skipped across the ice. Maija dropped the line and stepped on it before it slipped down the hole. When she squatted to pick it up, they came. Five of them, a leaden streak over snow. Yellow teeth,

footsteps within footsteps, total silence. Then one of them dived in, head low. The deer staggered. The others leapt in. She remembered her surprise when the sound of flesh being torn was no louder than that of cloth being ripped.

And as for bear . . .

Elin bound the ropes around the remains of her husband and Maija stood there and knew that although she had never seen a man dead from a bear attack before, she wasn't looking at one now, either. This body lacked the marks of a man protecting himself. There were no tears from claws or teeth, only this clean, vertical rip. Even to her untrained eye, this was not a bear's kill.

They were sitting on the porch. The priest had gone to wash his hands. Elin's face was pale. Maija could not see the children. Towards the right side of the yard, birch trees grew in a group. Too close together; they ought to have cleared them out. With the grown ones taking up that much space, there wasn't going to be enough light for the saplings.

'Bear didn't do this,' she said.

Elin stared ahead. Her face was vacant. It was as if she herself had gone somewhere else, now that Maija had seen what she wanted her to see.

'How would the seeds have ended up on his sleeve if they are not from here?' Maija asked.

Elin moved her head a little. 'I don't know,' she said.

'When did he go missing?'

'He was going to the marsh. He'd talked to Gustav about trying to harvest it further out in the wet areas this year. Three days ago. Perhaps it was three days ago.'

'Weren't you worried?'

Elin lifted her shoulders a fraction, let them fall again. 'He was often gone for long periods.'

‘Doing what?’

‘He travelled to the coast to trade. When he was here, he did whatever it is our men do. Hunting, fishing.’

The wound had not been the hacking gash made by an axe. It had been lengthy, narrow. The kind made by knife. No, not knife. Not stabs. Something swung by force. Rapier. The others would have known, too. As soon as they saw the body.

‘Did anything happen before he left?’ Maija asked. ‘Anything unusual?’

‘No. Nothing unusual.’ Elin met her gaze and her voice became sharp. ‘He was going to the marsh.’ The moment of strength was gone and her shoulders sank.

A faint wind drew over the yard. High grass bent as in prayer. The priest returned, wiping his mouth with a cloth. His tall figure and the long strides were too decided for the stillness; his profile too sharp. He tugged with his hand at his brown hair. He is young, Maija thought. Younger than you might think at first.

‘His brother . . .’ Elin’s voice waned.

The priest had reached them. In the corner of her eye, Maija saw him shaking his head.

‘If you tell me where he lives, I can speak with him on my way home,’ she said. She hesitated. ‘What will you do now?’

Elin didn’t answer.

As they left, Maija turned around once and now she saw the children. They were in the cluster of birch trees, flitting between the pale tree trunks like ghosts.

Nothing, she thought. We are nothing.