He Who Fears the Wolf

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Chapter 1

A dazzling ray of light slanted in through the trees.

The shock brought him up short. He wasn't ready. He had got out of bed, made his way one foot in front of the other through the dark house, still half-asleep, and come out on to the front steps. And there he encountered the sun.

It struck his eyes like an awl. He raised his hands to his eyes, but the light kept coming, penetrating cartilage and bone, all the way into the dark of his skull. Everything turned blindingly white inside. His thoughts fled in all directions, shattered into atoms. He wanted to scream, but he never screamed because to do so was beneath his dignity. Instead he clenched his teeth and stood as still as he could on the steps. Something was happening. The skin on his head began to tighten; a tingling sensation that was getting stronger. Trembling, he stood with his hands on his face. He felt his eyes being pulled apart as his nostrils flared, growing as big as keyholes. He whimpered faintly and tried to resist, but he couldn't stop the violent force. Bit by bit his features were erased. All that remained was a naked skull covered with translucent, white skin.

He struggled, frantic, moaning as he tried to feel his face, to be sure it was still there. His nose had turned soft and disgusting. He took his hand away – he had ruined what little was left, could feel it sliding off, losing its shape like a rotten plum.

And then it released him. Anxiously he took a breath, and felt his face slip back into place. He blinked several times, and opened and shut his mouth. But as he was about to move forwards he felt a deep pain in his chest, the sharp claws of an invisible monster. He doubled over, wrapping his arms around his torso to restrain the force that was yanking the skin of his breast tighter and tighter. His nipples vanished into his armpits. The skin on his bare chest grew thinner, the veins stood out like knotty cables, pulsing with black blood. He was bent nearly double, and knew that he was no longer able to resist it.

Suddenly he split open like a troll in the sunlight. His guts and intestines poured out. He tried to keep everything in by seizing hold of the edges of the wound and pulling them together, but it seeped out and ran through his fingers, collecting at his feet like the entrails of a slaughtered animal. His heart was still beating, trapped behind his ribs, terrified, pounding. He stood like that for a long time, bent double and gasping. He opened one eye and cast an anxious glance down his body. His abdominal cavity was empty. The outpour had stopped. He began clumsily to gather up what had come out, stuffing it back in any old how with one hand while he held on to his skin with the other, to prevent it from sliding out again. Nothing was in the right place; there were strange bulges everywhere, but if he could get the wound closed, no-one would know. He wasn't made like other people, though this wasn't plain to see. He

held on to the skin with his left hand, continuing to shove with his right. At last he got most of it inside again. Only a small spattering of blood was left on the steps. He pressed hard on the wound and felt it starting to close up, breathing cautiously so it would not open again. The sun was still shining through the trees, its white beams as sharp as swords. But he was whole again. Everything had happened too fast. He shouldn't have gone straight from bed out into the sunlight. He had always moved in a different space, seeing the world through a murky veil that took the sting out of the light and the sounds coming from outside. He held the veil in place by concentrating hard. A moment ago he had slipped up, had run out into the new day without taking stock, like a child.

His punishment seemed unreasonably harsh. Because as he slept on the dark bed, he had dreamed about something that made him sit bolt upright and then rush outside without thinking. He closed his eyes and recalled some images. He was looking at his mother at the bottom of the stairs. Out of her mouth gushed warm red blood. Fat and round, wearing a white apron with big flowers, she reminded him of a toppled jug, emptying red gravy. He remembered her voice, always accompanied by a dark velvety tone.

Then he went back inside the house.

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This is a story about Errki.

It began like this: at 3 a.m. he left the asylum. We don't refer to it as the asylum, Errki, and even though you surely have the right to call it whatever you like in private, you ought to take other people into consideration and give it a different name. It's a matter of courtesy. Or tact, if you will. Have you ever heard of that?

She was so eloquent, God help her, that her words seemed to seep out of her like oil. After the words came her sound, a shrill electric organ.

"It's called the Beacon," he said, and gave an acid smile. "Those of us here in the Beacon are all one big family. The telephone rings, may I speak to the Beacon please? Could someone get the mail for the Beacon?"

"Precisely. It's all a matter of habit. Everyone has to show a little consideration."

"Not me," he replied in a sullen voice. "I was committed against my will, per paragraph five. Dangerous to myself and possibly to others."

He leaned forward and whispered in her ear.

"Thanks to me you can swan around on pay grade 27."

The night nurse shivered. This was the time of day when she felt most vulnerable. This no-man'sland between night and morning, a grey void when the birds stopped singing and you couldn't be sure that they'd ever sing again. When anything might

have happened and she didn't yet know about it. She slumped a little, feeling faint. She didn't have the strength to see his pain, to remember who he was, that he was her charge. She just found him repulsive, self-absorbed and nasty.

"I realise that," she snapped. "But you've been here for four months now, and as far as I can tell, you seem to like it well enough."

As she said this her lips pursed like the beak of a hen. The organ struck a strident chord.

And so he left. It wasn't hard. The night was warm, and the window was ajar with a gap of 15 centimetres. It was locked with a steel bar, but he managed to remove the whole bar, using his belt buckle. The building was more than a hundred years old, and the screws came smoothly out of the rotting wood. His room was on the first floor. He jumped from the window as light as a bird and landed on the lawn.

He didn't cross the car park, but instead headed through the woods towards the small lake, which they called the Well. It didn't matter which route he took. The point was that he didn't want to stay in the Beacon any more.

The lake was beautiful. It didn't put on airs, just lay there without a ripple, resting in the landscape, open and still. Didn't push him away, didn't lure him forward. Didn't touch him. Was simply there. The asylum was only a stone's throw away, but invisible because of the trees. Nestor asked him to stop for a moment, and he did. He stared down into the black Well, and thought of Tormod, who was found floating face down in the water, wearing rubber gloves, as always, with his blond hair waving in the greenish-black water. He didn't look very good, but then he never had. He was fat and sluggish with colourless eyes, and besides he was stupid. A disgusting, pudding-like fellow who went around asking people to excuse him, afraid of infecting them or of being in the way, afraid that someone would notice his contaminated breath. Now the poor man was with God. Maybe he was sloshing around on a cloud, freed at last from his clammy gloves. Maybe he'd met Errki's mother up there, maybe she was floating on the cloud next to his. Errki loved his mother. The thought of Tormod's fluttering eyes with the blond eyelashes made him swallow hard. He gave a couple of irritated shrugs of his thin shoulders and kept walking.

His dark figure was quite visible against all that light-green foliage, but no-one saw him. The others were asleep. After his suicide Tormod was reduced to a practical phenomenon for which they had need: an empty bed. An astonishing transformation. Tormod was no longer Tormod, he was an empty bed. And he too would become an empty bed, with the sheets tucked in tight. He listened to the voice and gave a brisk nod. Then he walked on, sauntering through the dense woods. By the time the night nurse arrived to peek into his room, he had been walking for more than two hours. She didn't dare repeat their conversation. "No, I didn't notice anything unusual, he was as he always is." The sun had come up and shone in her face through the window of the staffroom where they held their morning meetings. The words burned her throat like acid.

He passed the riding centre. Heard the big dark animals restlessly scraping their hooves. One of them saw him and gave a loud snort. He looked at them out of the corner of his eye and felt a deep longing to stay with them, to be like them. No-one would go up to a horse and ask: who are you? A horse had to bear whatever burden it was given, and afterwards it was allowed to rest. And the horse that was incapable of doing anything got a bullet in its forehead. One day at a time. Walk around the enclosure with a child on its back. Take a drink from the old bathtub. Sleep standing up with its head drooping. Shake off a few insects. Until the end of its days.

Now he was walking on the road. People would soon be crawling out from under sheets and quilts. Tumbling out of holes and anthills. He could feel it approaching, like a vibration in the air. Before long the traffic would be on the move. Errki picked up his pace. It would be better to go back into the woods. Occasionally he raised his head. He liked the quivering trees, the light shimmering through the leaves, and the smell of grass in his nostrils. The sound of twigs and heather crunching under his feet. Trees, grey and dry, that stood there, anchored in the earth. He snatched at a fern and pulled it up, roots and all, held it to his eyes and muttered, "Root, stem and leaf. Root, stem and leaf."

In time he grew tired. In the distance he saw a crag and beneath it a dark shadow. When he reached it he curled up in the grass, listening all the while to the voice. It hummed inside him, steady and peaceful, like a power station. In his pocket he had a little pill box with a screw-on lid. Sleep is Death's brother, he thought, and closed his eyes.

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He was at the edge of a plain.

Only Errki could walk like that, his tread heavy, limping like a crow with clipped wings, but moving fast. Everything hung from him, his long hair, his open jacket, and the baggy trousers that he hadn't taken off in a long time – old polyester trousers with a rank smell of sweat and urine. His head was tilted, as if a tendon were pulling his neck. He seldom looked up; instead he kept his gaze mostly fixed on the ground, so that what he chiefly saw was his feet trudging along. They moved by themselves. He didn't need a destination, he could keep going for hours without getting tired. He walked as tenaciously as a wind-up toy with a key in its back.

He was a man of 24 with narrow shoulders but surprisingly wide hips. He had inherited bad hip joints, and had to swing his hips in a special way to make his legs cooperate. An annoying swing, as if he had something hideous on his back that he wanted to shake off. It made people think that he walked like a woman. His neck was also thinner and longer than usual for a man, almost too thin to bear the weight of his head. Not that his head was particularly large, but the contents were much heavier than was common.

He weighed only 60 kilos and ate little. It was hard to decide what he wanted to eat. Bread or cornflakes? Sausage or a hamburger? An apple or a banana? How did

people actually go about making all the choices that life required? How did they know if they'd made the right choice?

In his pocket was his pill box with a screw-on top which contained all he needed to arrange his thoughts in acceptable order, and to make his legs obey him, up and down the corridors of the Beacon, on the bus, on the train, or wandering along the road.

When he wasn't on the move he would lie still and rest. His hair was long and black and wiry. It hung over his face like a filthy tassel. His skin was scarred with acne. The pimples had appeared in his thirteenth year, fermenting like tiny volcanoes. He stopped washing. They looked much worse if he rubbed them with soap and water. They weren't quite so noticeable with dirt and grease caked on his skin in a thick layer. Beneath the wiry hair a long, narrow face could be glimpsed, with sharp cheekbones and narrow black brows. His eyes were deep-set and strange, most often downcast, avoiding anyone's glance. But if someone did make contact, they shone with a pale light. Because of his long hair and all the clothes he wore, his skin was white even in the summer. His trousers rode low on his hips, held in place by a leather belt. The buckle was a brass eagle with outspread wings and a crooked beak. It had tiny enamel eyes that stared down at an invisible prey, perhaps at Errki's modest genitals within the filthy trousers. His penis was small for a man his age, and it had never been inside a woman. No-one knew this, and even he ignored the fact, focusing on more important matters. Besides, the eagle was impressive enough as it swayed in time with the rotation of Errki's hips. Maybe it fooled people into thinking that the equipment below might actually be a beast of prey.

It was quiet and hot along the road, and there were yellow fields on both sides for as far as the eye could see. A girl with a pram was approaching. She saw the dark, lumbering figure from far off and realised that she would have to pass him. He looked odd, and as he got closer she could feel her body tense, and her steps grew stiffer. The figure was jolting and twisting along; there was something both timid and aggressive about him, and it occurred to her that she should not look into his eyes, but move quickly past, with an indifferent and superior look on her face. She must not show that she was afraid because she had the feeling that if he smelled her fear, he would attack, just like an untrustworthy dog.

The girl was as fair and pretty as Errki was dark and ugly. Even through the veil her approach was like a sharp light. She was clutching the handle of the pram, pushing it brusquely ahead of her like a shield, as if she were willing to sacrifice whatever it contained to save her own skin. Or so Errki thought. He had been walking for a long time, lost in thought. Now he was aware of the figure mincing towards him on the periphery of his vision. It looked insignificant, like a piece of fluttering white paper. He did not raise his head. He had long ago registered the contours that were approaching. Of all the things in Errki's world of perceptions, a girl with a pram was the most pitiful. That producing a child should give a woman that stupid expression of bliss was something he couldn't understand. In spite of the billions of wailing inhabitants on earth, having a child changed their whole view of life. It was beyond his comprehension. Yet he did cast a glance at her and asked the question: evil intentions or none at all? He had no experience of good intentions. But he never let

himself be fooled. It was impossible to recognise an enemy by outward superficial appearances. Under the baby blanket she might have hidden a knife. He imagined something with a barbed point and jagged edge. One never knew.

They passed each other. At that instant Errki heard the brittle sound of tinkling glass. The girl tightened her grip on the handle of the pram. For a brief moment she looked up. To her horror she saw the strange light in his eyes and inside his open jacket she read the words on his T-shirt:

KILL THE OTHERS

It was something she wouldn't forget. And so she became one of many who would later report to the police that she had seen the man they were looking for on that day at that particular spot.

The others were always after him. Not just his ravaged body with its organs all jumbled together, or his hard-as-stone heart that trembled behind the grating of bones. They wanted to get inside him. Into the secret space with the dazzling lamps. They wrapped their evil intentions in fine words, nagged him about the blessing of reality and the exciting challenge of community. He couldn't bear it.

What if he didn't want to?

He shook his head in confusion. His thoughts had wandered out of control, disturbing his sense of time. He tottered back into the room and sank down on the filthy mattress. He was glad that he had run away from the suffocating asylum, glad that he had found the abandoned cabin. He curled up on his side with his knees bent, his hands between his legs, his cheek pressed against the mouldy mattress. He was staring deep inside himself, down into the dark, dusty cellar where a narrow hole in the ceiling opened, letting in a ray of pale light. It formed a circular patch on the stone floor. There sat Nestor. Beside him a ragged coat. The coat looked quite innocent, like something discarded, but Errki knew better. He lay still for a long time, waiting, and then fell asleep again. The wound needed time to grow together. While it grew he dreamed. After the punishment he was always given comfort, and he accepted it. It was part of the agreement. It was 6.03 a.m. on July 4th, and a fierce heat was already seeping in.

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The cabin had come as a surprise, hidden in a dense grove of trees. It was an old place where no-one had lived for decades, yet it was in good repair, although most of the furnishings had been ruined long ago by drifters. Over the years quite a few such people had made themselves at home for a brief period, setting their mark on the worn rooms, leaving empty bottles behind.

He had stood in the grove for a while and stared. It was a wooden house, and in front was a little yard with a lush lawn. He put his hand tentatively on the door and pushed it open, then stood for a moment, sniffing the air. Inside he found a kitchen, living room and two bedrooms. On one of the beds lay an old striped mattress. He

tiptoed from room to room, looking around, breathing in the smell of old timber. In this house Errki was closer to his ancestors than he knew. It was an old summer cabin, constructed on the ancient site of one of the many Finnish dwellings built in the 1600s. As he walked around he listened to the mute walls. It looked as if something had happened. A rage had settled in the walls. Many of the thick beams had splinters sticking out of deep gashes, as if someone had attacked them with an axe. Not a single window pane was intact; only a few shards of glass remained in the shattered frames. He thought of three or four things at once. It was impossible to get here by car, and as far as he knew no-one had seen him when he had turned off the road and began clambering through the undergrowth. He didn't have a watch, but he knew he had walked for about 30 minutes after leaving the roadway. The fact that he had no food or extra clothes didn't bother him, but he was thirsty. He ground his jaws together to create some saliva and began chewing on his tongue.

He went into the room that had been the kitchen and started opening the drawers. The knobs were gone, so he had to prise them open with his long fingernails. He found a fork with missing prongs and a box of candles. Crumbs and cobwebs. Bottle caps. An empty matchbox. Under the broken kitchen window lay the remnants of a net curtain, but when he picked it up, the fabric dissolved in his fingers. He went back to the living room. The room had one window facing out the front and one on the opposite wall, looking out at a pond. Against one wall stood an old sofa with rough green upholstery. Across from it stood a large wardrobe. He opened it and peered inside. It was empty. The wooden floor was stained and rough under his feet. He let himself sink onto the sofa. The springs screeched and a cloud of dust rose up from the threadbare fabric. He changed his mind and went into the bedroom with the bed and mattress. He pulled off his jacket and T-shirt and lay down. He was gone for an eternity. When he woke up he had forgotten where he was, and besides, he had been dreaming. That was why he made the big mistake, stepping straight out into the sunshine without stopping to think. It was humiliating to scrape up his own guts from the step, listening to Nestor's spiteful laughter, as his intestines slid through his fingers like baby snakes.

He woke for a second time, sat up very slowly and stared around the room, running his hand over his chest to make sure it was whole. Only a jagged red scar remained. It ran from between his nipples all the way down to his navel. He got up from the bed. The sun was higher now. The room was empty except for a rough bedside table that was really no more than a crate. Slowly he straightened his back and walked over to the table and pulled out the drawer. While he stood there staring down at the drawer, he rubbed absentmindedly at a tender spot on his hip. He had been lying on something hard. He went back to the bed and looked down at the mattress, and felt around with his fingers. Something narrow and hard was there. He lifted the mattress with difficulty and rolled it back. Underneath was a big hole in the striped cover where some of the foam had been removed. He stuck his hand inside and dug around, until he felt something cold. He pulled it out and stared in amazement, not believing his eyes. Of all the things to find in this dilapidated place, inside a mouldy old mattress: a pistol. He held it gingerly in both hands and looked down the barrel. In Errki's hands it was a foreign object, but when he gripped it in his right hand with a finger on the trigger, it felt good. What power it had. All the power of heaven and earth. Breeze, gale and storm. Out of curiosity he turned a lever and opened it. There

was one bullet in the chamber. Eagerly he pulled it out and examined it. It was long and shiny and surprisingly round at the tip. He pressed the round back into the chamber, pleased at how well it fitted. The discovery made him look around. Someone had spent the night here and left the pistol behind. That was odd. Maybe the person had been caught by surprise and didn't have time to take it with him. Maybe he was waiting somewhere until he could come back and get it. It was a fine gun. Errki didn't know much about firearms, but he thought it was a large-calibre revolver of an expensive kind. He read the tiny letters on the stock: Colt.

"What do you think, Nestor?" he murmured softly as he turned the weapon this way and that. Then he stopped abruptly and tossed it away. The pistol crashed onto the floor. He ran out to the kitchen and stood there for a moment, clinging to the bench. He should have thought of that. Nestor would come up with some disgusting suggestion. He could hear them down there in the dark cellar, laughing so the dust flew. He went back and stood looking at the gun for a long time. After a time he put it back inside the mattress. He didn't need it; he had other weapons. He wandered around the house, from the kitchen to the living room and back again, keeping his eyes on the stained floorboards. They creaked and carried on, the pitch varying. Soon he had created a whole melody from his route from room to room. His black hair and his jacket and trousers shook frenetically. His arms stuck out woodenly from his body, and he moved his fingers in rhythm, in time with the creaking boards. He was sucked into the rhythm; he walked and walked, unable to stop, not wanting to. In the repetition he found peace. He had no other aim than to walk, back and forth, taking even steps, his fingers splayed. Creak, creak, Errki goes, to and fro, over and over, from room to room, bumpetybump.

He didn't know how long he had been walking, but eventually he gathered his courage and went to stand in the doorway. He hesitated and then opened the door. Bright sunlight flooded the clearing. He lowered his eyes and took a cautious step out onto the stone steps, then made his way through the deep grass. He stopped and sniffed up at the pine cones and down at the thicket of ferns and bracken. Root, stem and leaf. At last he was in motion again, though he didn't know where he was going or what he would do. Nestor was guiding his steps through the undergrowth towards civilisation.

It was still early morning. Only the early-risers had got out of bed. They had opened their curtains and looked out at the radiant day. Hot. Bright. Shimmering green. They made optimistic plans for the day, wanting to take advantage of the beautiful weather of the all-too brief summer. One of them was Halldis Horn. She lived alone on a little farm not far from the old Finnish cabin. As Errki took his first steps through the grass, she was pulling her nightgown over her head.