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Opening Extract from...

Game

Written by Anders de la Motte

Translated from the Swedish by Neil Smith

Published by Blue Door

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GAME

ANDERS DE LA MOTTE

Game

Translated from the Swedish by Neil Smith



blue door

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the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
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Game [Geim]
A competitive activity involving skill, chance, or endurance on the part of two or more persons who play according to a set of rules, usually for their own amusement or for that of spectators.
An amusement or pastime
A state of being willing to do something
Evasive, trifling, or manipulative behaviour
An animal hunted for food or sport
A calculated strategy or approach; a scheme
A distraction or diversion
Having or showing skill or courage
An activity for recreation

www.wiktionary.org
www.dictionary.com
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'Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing!'
Vince Lombardi

Blinking is supposed to be the fastest movement the human body is physically capable of.

Even so, it hardly compares to the brain's electrical synapses.

'Not now!' was the thought that flashed through his head when the light hit him.

And, from his point of view, he was absolutely right. There ought to be more time, plenty of time – that was what he had been promised. After all, he had followed the instructions to the letter, had done exactly what he had been told to do.

So this shouldn't be happening.

Not now!

Absolutely not!

His surprise was entirely understandable, not to say logical. And it was also the last sensory impression of his life.

A millisecond later the explosion turned him into a charred jigsaw puzzle that would take the police forensics team more than a week to put together. Piece by piece, like

a macabre family game, until he was more or less back in his original shape.

But by then the Game was long since over.

1

Wanna play a game?

The text flashed up on the screen for the umpteenth time, and for the umpteenth time HP clicked it away in irritation. No, he didn't want to play any bloody game, all he wanted to do was figure out how the mobile phone in his hand worked, and whether it was possible to do anything as simple as make a phone call with it?

The commuter train from Märsta, early July, heading towards the city.

Almost thirty degrees, his top sticking to his back, his mouth already dry. Predictably, he was out of fags, and the only consolation was the breeze generated by the speed of the train, forcing its way through the pathetic little ventilation window above his head.

He sniffed his t-shirt a couple of times, then checked his breath. The results were pretty much as expected. An away match, hangover, and the smell of something rotting in his mouth. Yeehaa! An almost perfect Sunday morning, if it weren't for the fact that it was actually Thursday morning and he should have been at work two hours ago. So much for that period of probation.

But so what.

It was only a McJob anyway, a bunch of losers with a fully paid-up wanker in charge.

It's important to be one of the team, Pettersson. Yeah, right. Like he was going to hum Kumbayah and play team-building games with anyone. The only reason he was there was so he could make a new claim for unemployment benefit afterwards.

Suck on that, mofos!

He had noticed it shortly after the train left Rosersberg. A small, silver-coloured object on the seat on the other side of the aisle. Someone had been sitting there a minute ago, but had got off and the train was already moving again. So there was no point waving and shouting about it now, if he was seriously considering Doing The Right Thing.

As if . . .!

Anyway, everyone had a responsibility to look after their own damn stuff, didn't they?

So he looked quickly around instead, searching for security cameras with a practiced eye and, once he'd concluded that the carriage was too old to have any, he changed seat so he could examine his find at leisure.

As he had thought, a mobile phone, and his morning suddenly got a bit better.

A new model, touchscreen. Sweet!

It was odd, but he couldn't find the manufacturer's name anywhere, but maybe the phone was so exclusive that there was no need for one? Unless the engraved lettering on the back was actually a brand-name?

128, it said in light-grey lettering slightly less than a centimetre high.

He couldn't remember ever hearing of a phone company with that name.

But what the hell . . .

It must be worth five hundred kronor or so from the

Greek who dealt in stolen mobiles. The alternative was spending a couple of hundred disabling the IMEI code so the owner wouldn't be able to stop the thing working, then he could keep it for himself.

But that was hardly an option . . .

Last night had blown a definitive hole in his already overstretched finances. He'd had nothing in his account for ages, and he'd already used up all his other life-lines. But with a bit of hustling here and there he'd soon be back on his feet . . .

You could never keep someone like him down for long, the mobile was living proof of that. He held the phone up to examine it more closely.

It was small and neat, hardly bigger than the palm of his hand, and the shell was made of brushed steel. A small hole in the back indicated that it was equipped with a camera, and at the top was a clumsy black clip, presumably so you could fasten it to your clothes. The clip was in marked contrast to the otherwise minimalist design, and he was about to see if he couldn't take it off when the screen suddenly came to life.

Wanna play a game?

it asked, showing two icons for Yes and No.

HP started in surprise. In his comatose, hungover state he hadn't even checked if the phone was switched on.

Careless!

He touched his finger to the No icon, then tried to work out how to get the menu to appear. If he was lucky, he'd be able to use the phone for a few days until the owner managed to block it.

But instead of a normal start menu, the phone just kept repeating the question, and now, as he clicked it away, with

growing irritation, goodness knows how many times, he was on the verge of giving up.

Fucking shit phone!

He swallowed a couple of times in an attempt to stop himself throwing up. Fucking hangover, he ought to know better than to mix his drinks, and he was so desperate for a cigarette that he felt like he was going to burst.

As for that girl, Christ, she was a dog, but what could you expect if you went out on the pull in the burbs? He had made a quick exit when the morning light mercilessly revealed her shortcomings, giving some lame excuse about a football game he'd promised a friend he'd show up for. To judge by her lack of response, the feeling had been pretty mutual. *Run, Forrest, run!*

But he wasn't really in any hurry to get back to Maria Trappgränd. A stop to see the Greek, some easy money that ought to be enough for a hangover pizza and then a few beers at Kvarnen.

There was always space for that in the diary.

If he was lucky, there'd be enough left over for a bit of weed, because the mobile was no bog-standard design like the ones he sometimes 'chanced' upon. Five hundred to a thousand kronor pure profit, all in all not a bad day, in spite of the hangover and the tropical heat.

The screen flashed again and his finger had almost gone automatically to the No icon before he noticed that this message was different.

Wanna play a game, **Henrik Pettersson**?
Yes
No

HP stiffened in his seat.

What the fuck . . .?

He glanced around quickly a few times. Was someone messing with him?

There were maybe ten, twelve other passengers spread out around the carriage, and apart from a mother with two hyperactive kids almost all of them seemed to be in the same sluggish morning coma as him. Hanging heads, glassy eyes, sweaty, overheating. Not one of them so much as glanced in his direction.

He checked the screen again. The same text. How the hell could the phone know his name?

He looked around, but was left none the wiser. Then he clicked the button for No.

A new message flashed up immediately, this time in Swedish.

Are you really sure you don't want to play a Game, HP?

He almost flew out of his seat. What in the name of holy fuck was going on here?

He shut his eyes tight, took a couple of deep breaths, and regained control of his galloping hangover anxiety.

Just keep calm, he thought. You're a smart lad. And this isn't the fucking Twilight Zone.

Either this is *Candid Camera* or else one of your mates is mucking about with you. Probably the latter . . .

Manga was top of the list of suspects. An old friend from school, good with technical stuff, owned a computer shop, got furious about anyone taking the piss about his new-found Arab god, and he had a really sick sense of humour.

Yep, no doubt about it. This was one of Manga's sick jokes!

Relief spread through his body.

So, Mangalito.

It had been ages. He had actually thought that getting married and his new religion had turned Manga soft, but the little bastard must have been biding his time for this masterstroke.

First he had to work out how it all fitted together, and then find a way to turn the joke back on Manga.

It was bloody well thought-out so far, he had to give the little floor-kisser credit for that.

HP looked around once again.

Nine people in total in the carriage, twelve if he counted the young kids.

Three teenage girls, an alcoholic, two stereotypical Swedish blokes about the same age as him, somewhere round thirty. An old boy with a stick, a pretty decent girl of twenty-five or so with a ponytail and wearing running gear (it must have been the hangover that stopped him noticing her earlier), and finally the woman with the kids.

Whichever one of them Manga the Muslim had managed to recruit, they had to have some sort of electronic gizmo to be able to send the messages. Sadly, that didn't exactly make the list much shorter. Five of them were clicking on some sort of electronic gadget, and, if you counted the earplugs the alcoholic was wearing, at a push you could stretch the list of suspects to six.

His weary brain came to the conclusion that it was more the rule than the exception to mess about with a mobile on the train, not just to send texts but to kill a few minutes with one of those stupid mobile phone games.

So, Einstein – not really much wiser.

His head was throbbing from the unexpected exertion, and his mouth was still bone-dry. Strangely enough, though, he did feel slightly more alert.

So what happened now?

How was he going to get his own back?

He decided to go along with the prank for a while, so first he pressed the No icon, then, when the question was repeated, the icon for Yes.

Oh yes, he'd play along with it for a while and pretend to be taken in, and the more he thought about it, the more he realized that this was actually pretty cool. A good way of passing time on a boring train journey.

'Fucking Manga,' he grinned, before a new message appeared on the screen.

Welcome to the Game HP!

Thanks! he thought, leaning back.

This was going to be interesting, after all.

Even before the wheels of the heavy vehicle had stopped Rebecca Normén was out on the pavement. The heat that hit her was so intense that she wanted to get back into the cool of the car at once.

Three weeks of high summer in Sweden had made the streets so hot that the tarmac had started to stick to your shoes, and the bulletproof vest she was wearing under her shirt and jacket was hardly making things any better.

After quickly surveying the scene and deciding there was no danger, she opened the door and let out her charge, who had been waiting obediently in the back seat.

The guard on the door of the main government offices at Rosenbad was for once awake enough to open the door immediately, and a few moments later Sweden's Minister for Integration was safely inside the thick walls of the government building.

Rebecca had time for a quick coffee in the canteen and

then a trip to the toilet before returning to her driver to check they were ready for the next move.

She looked at the time. Fourteen more minutes to wait, then a short walk along the quayside to the Foreign Ministry for a meeting with the minister who, unlike her own charge, had a full team of bodyguards. At least two, usually more. A whole team, the way it should be.

'Personal protection coordinator' was her job-title, presumably because 'one-man bodyguard unit' didn't sound particularly reassuring. The Minister for Integration was deemed a suitably demanding job for someone with less than a year's experience as a bodyguard, at least in the opinion of her boss. Medium to low threat-level, according to the latest analysis. Besides, and this may have been more significant, none of her older colleagues wanted the job of personal protection coordinator . . .

As she emerged from the main entrance she caught her driver quickly tossing his cigarette in the gutter next to the car.

Unprofessional, she thought with irritation, but what else did she expect?

Unlike her, he wasn't a proper bodyguard but a less skilled version intended to save the state money. A chauffeur with a bit of extra training and a badly fitting bulletproof vest, employed by the transport unit of the Cabinet Office rather than the Security Police. Twenty years older than her and with obvious problems taking orders from someone younger, let alone a woman.

'Ten minutes,' she said curtly. 'Stay here with the car until we get there.'

'Wouldn't it be better if I drove to the Foreign Ministry now? It's usually a hell of a job finding anywhere to park there.'

His objection was predictable. The driver, Bengt, his

name was, had decided on principle to have some sort of opinion about everything she said. There was a hint of 'listen, young lady . . .' in every sentence he uttered.

As if age and gender automatically made him an expert at protecting people.

Clearly his one week of training hadn't taught him that backwards was safe, but that forwards was unknown territory and therefore higher risk. Idiot!

'You'll wait here until I tell you to drive over!' she snapped, without bothering to explain her decision. 'Any questions?'

'No, boss,' he replied, without making much effort to hide his irritation.

Why on earth was it so hard to get certain types of men to accept a woman as their boss? Either they tried to get the better of you and take control, like Bengt here, or worse, made insinuations and comments about your sex-life, or lack of one.

Offering you their services, whether or not they happened to be married . . . And if you were stupid enough to complain to your own boss you were soon out in the cold. She'd seen plenty of examples of that.

She never dated colleagues, on principle. Mixing your work and private life soon got way too complicated. Put simply: don't shit on your own doorstep.

The fact was that she never actually dated anyone. Maybe dating itself was too complicated?

She shrugged to shake off the unwelcome thought. Right now her job was her priority.

Everything else could wait.

No sooner had they gone round the corner of the government offices than she realized something was wrong. A minute ago, when she had checked out their

route in advance, there had been three people leaning over the railing by the waters of Norrström. Two of them holding fishing rods, and the third dressed in fishing gear too, even if she couldn't see a fishing rod. None of them had seemed to pose any great threat.

But when Rebecca and her charge, along with the minister's constantly chattering assistant, approached the place where the three men were standing, she noticed a change in their body language. She automatically slid her right hand inside her jacket, putting her thumb on the barrel of her pistol, and her fingers on the telescopic baton and police radio attached to her belt. She just had time to put a warning hand on her charge's right shoulder when it happened.

Two of the men spun round and took a couple of quick steps towards them. One of them unfolded some sort of poster that he held in front of him, while the second raised his hand to throw something.

'Sweden protects killers! Sweden protects killers!' the men screamed as they rushed towards the minister.

Rebecca reacted instantly. She pressed the alarm button on her radio and in one sweeping gesture she pulled the baton out of her belt, extended it to its full length, and brought it down through the middle of the intrusive poster. She felt the baton hit something hard and saw the attackers take a step back, momentarily off balance.

'Back to the car,' she roared at the Minister for Integration, as she pulled the woman behind her back. With the baton raised over her shoulder she backed away quickly towards the car, her hand still gripping the minister's upper arm.

'Victor five, we're under attack, repeat, we're under attack, get the car ready!' she yelled into the little microphone in her collar: it had started transmitting automatically when she pressed the alarm.

It would be at least three minutes until reinforcements arrived, probably nearer five, she calculated rapidly. She could only hope that Bengt hadn't dozed off behind the wheel so they could make a quick getaway.

Before they got back to the corner of the building again their attackers made a new attempt to reach Rebecca and her charge. Something came flying through the air and she hit out at it automatically with her baton.

'Rock, bottle, hand grenade?' she managed to think before tepid liquid rained down on her face and upper body. 'Dear God, please don't let it be petrol!'

Finally, they were round the corner again and she looked quickly behind her for Bengt, hoping he remembered enough of his minimal training to have the car doors open for them.

But the turning circle where the car had been parked was empty.

'Fuck!' she hissed, but was drowned out by the assistant's screams.

'Blood!' he screamed, almost in falsetto. 'Christ, I'm bleeding!'

Rebecca twisted her head again but suddenly she was having trouble seeing. A red fog was descending over her eyes and she rubbed the hand holding the baton across her face to clear her eyes.

No car, no Bengt, and their attackers right behind them. What to do?

'Make a decision, Normén, make a decision now!' her brain shrieked at her.

Backwards known and secure, forwards unknown and dangerous. But what to do if your escape route had suddenly been cut off? They didn't teach you that on the bodyguard course. Improvisation had never been her strong point. She was close to panic.

‘Over here!’ a voice shouted.

The guard had opened the door wide and had taken up a position halfway between it and her. He’d drawn his baton and was staring at the corner where their attackers ought to have appeared by now.

With a couple of quick strides Rebecca half-pulled and half-shoved the Minister for Integration through the door that they had left just a few minutes before. She could still hear the assistant’s hysterical sobbing behind her, but paid him no attention, concentrating on getting her charge to safety.

It wasn’t until several minutes later, after reinforcements had arrived and the situation had calmed down, that she realized that the whole of her upper body was covered in blood.

2

Trial

Dear HP
This is a trial game worth 100 points.
Try it out, and if you like the experience,
decide if you want to continue playing.
This is your task: At the next station a man in
a light coat will get on the train.
The man will be carrying a red umbrella.
For 100 points, you must take the umbrella
before the train reaches Stockholm Central.
If you succeed I will unlock the phone and it
will be yours to use as long as you participate
in the Game. Do you understand?
Yes
No

This was actually fucking cool, HP grinned to himself as he clicked on Yes. Real *Mission Impossible* stuff – all that was missing was the dry voice and the telephone going up in smoke.

This message will self-destruct in ten seconds . . .

He still hadn't managed to work out which one of the

other passengers was working for Manga, but it didn't really matter. He thought he had a pretty good idea of what it was all about now. Either he was expected to chicken out and would have to put up with weeks of crap about what a coward he was, or else – and this was more likely, now he came to think about it – there'd be some trick with the umbrella. It would be glued down, or would spray water, or give him an electric shock when he tried to grab it, and one or other of the passengers would film it so he could enjoy his humiliation on YouTube for months to come. It really was a beautiful set up, and now it was too late to back out.

Excellent!
When you get the signal to start playing, fix the phone to your clothes with the camera facing out, so we can see how you get on with your task.
Do you understand?

Yep, he understood. Fix the phone to his front, camera outwards.

YouTube, here I come!

HP grinned again. God, Manga was an ingenious bastard. This set a whole new standard. As he clicked on Yes once more, he realized to his surprise that his hangover was almost gone.

Good, HP!
You can start your task.
Good luck!

The screen went dark.

Okay, better follow the rules for a bit longer, he thought,

and attached the phone to his belt, with the camera facing out, as per the instructions.

As the train pulled slowly into Sollentuna station he could feel his heart start to beat faster.

The man with the light coat got on at the far end of the carriage and it took a few moments before HP saw him. An ordinary-looking Swede, about forty, one metre eighty or so, same as him. Dark-framed glasses, hair combed back, a summer suit and coat, he noted as the train set off from the platform. That had to be hot.

The man's lower half was hidden, so HP couldn't see if he really was carrying an umbrella. There was only one way to find out.

He stood up and started moving slowly through the carriage towards the man. For some reason he was sweating, his t-shirt was sticking to his chest and his palms itched, but this time it was more than just the hangover.

As he passed the teenage girls one of them suddenly burst out laughing and the sound made him jump. Pull yourself together, this is only a game, an elaborate prank, nothing to get excited about. Stealing a crummy umbrella was hardly that much of a challenge for him. He'd nicked considerably better things than that.

Now he could see that the man was carrying a black and white paper bag, one of those designer ones with a rope handle and a big logo to show the world that he could afford to shop in the smartest shops. A cylindrical object stuck up from one side of the bag. The umbrella!

HP felt his pulse start to race. He had to admit that this was all pretty exciting. Stealing something while the whole thing was being filmed . . .

Okay, so the man in the coat was in on the whole thing, but even so. There was something appealing about the

unfolding situation that he couldn't quite explain. But he really didn't want to make a fool of himself.

'Next stop Karlberg. Karlberg, next stop,' the speaker in the roof announced, and he felt the train start to slow down. He took a few more cautious steps towards the man, who hadn't so much as glanced up at him.

Then the train jolted several times and stopped at the platform. The doors opened, letting in a smell of warm tarmac and hot brakes. HP took another step forward. Here we go!

'Pigs' blood,' Superintendent Runeberg said from behind his desk, leaning back in his chair.

Although several hours had passed since the events outside Rosenbad, and even though the office was air-conditioned, Rebecca was still sweating. Her hair was wet from the shower, and in the absence of anything better she had put on her gym kit, the only clean clothes she had in her locker.

'They threw pigs' blood at you and Lessmark,' her boss went on. He was a thickset man in his mid-forties, with a steely gaze, spiky blond hair and a suntan that went all the way down to his scalp.

A perfect example of a bodyguard. Good-looking too, if you like the over-pumped type, she thought.

But those days were far behind her now.

Strangely, considering what had happened, she felt pretty good, with the possible exception of a bit of adrenalin-fuelled trembling that she was doing her best to hide. She had done her job and her charge was okay, that was the main thing. She could think through the details later.

'According to Forensics, one of the men threw a balloon filled with pigs' blood at the Minister for Integration, but you burst it with your baton and most of the contents

ended up on you. The minister escaped with a few drops on her jacket and a serious bruise on her arm from where you were holding her.'

He paused, but before she could work out if she was expected to say something he went on:

'One of the evening papers seems to have pictures already, which would explain why the third man wasn't involved in the actual attack. Presumably he was busy taking pictures. The free market and the free press in beautiful harmony. The Minister sends her thanks and best wishes, by the way. I doubt the same could be said of the perpetrators,' Runeberg said.

Rebecca gave a short nod in response.

'According to eye-witnesses, the men escaped on foot, running across Gustav Adolfs torg and in through the back entrance to the Gallery shopping mall. Our uniformed colleagues in the regular force stopped the underground, but before they managed to get hold of someone in charge and the order was actually given, at least four different underground trains left Stockholm Central, and one from Kungsträdgården nearby, so if they were stupid enough not to just melt into the crowds around Sergels torg there were plenty of opportunities for them to get away on the tube.'

Runeberg shrugged in resignation.

'One advantage of doing this sort of thing in broad daylight in the middle of the city is that it's a lot easier than most people think to get away,' he concluded.

'While you were cleaning yourself up I had a quick chat with your driver, Mr Göransson. He claims that you told him to go ahead of you to the Foreign Ministry and wait there, which was why you had no escape route,' Runeberg went on in a businesslike voice. Rebecca jerked in her chair.

Not only had Bengt disobeyed her orders and put her and her charge in danger, now the fat little bastard was lying to save his own skin. Trying to blame her for everything, what a fucking nerve! If he'd done his job and the car had been where it should have been, she would have been fine, she could have managed perfectly well without backup.

She opened her mouth to protest but her boss raised a hand to stop her.

'Take it easy, Normén. You don't have to say anything, I know the bastard's lying. In the ten months that you've been with us, no-one's been more by-the-book than you. You don't do anything without considering it from every angle, and your colleagues have nothing but praise for your efforts. The other day one of them said you were one hundred and ten per cent professional, and I wouldn't disagree with that assessment. You're a pretty good bodyguard, Normén. For a rookie, anyway . . .' he grinned. 'Besides, Göransson is a hopeless liar. He was sweating like a pig and was almost in tears at the end of our little talk. So, since approximately an hour ago, his services have been at the disposal of the job market. I don't give a shit what the union says. I threw him out of the back door myself,' Runeberg concluded with a smile, nodding happily at Rebecca to confirm that he had done precisely what he said.

'Little boys,' she sighed inwardly before realizing that he had actually praised her work, so she opted to lower her eyes respectfully to underline her status as grateful subordinate. As usual in this sort of system, you had to make the best of things and not make a fuss.

The fact that the guard on the door had had to help still annoyed her, but Runeberg had just called her a good

bodyguard, which wasn't bad for a *rookie* with less than a year's experience.

Not bad at all!

HP counted to ten in his head and glanced at the platform one last time before stepping up to the man in the coat. The man looked up at him in surprise from the newspaper he had just pulled out of his pocket.

'Tell Manga he's still a carpet-licking bastard!' HP shouted into the man's ear, as he snatched the umbrella from the paper bag and, just as the doors were beginning to close, he leapt out onto the platform. He landed so hard that he almost lost his balance and had to take a couple of lurching steps to stop himself falling flat on his face.

Fuck me! he thought as he sprinted towards the steps at the far end of the platform. It wasn't quite the stylish exit he had planned, but what the hell. He had the umbrella, the task was accomplished and none of the nightmare scenarios he'd been imagining had come true. The umbrella had been no problem, no explosions, no cascade of water, and no grinning TV presenters telling him he'd just been caught on *You've Been Framed*, *Candid Camera* or some similarly classy programme.

Apart from the stumble as he left the train, everything had gone according to plan and he could relax and enjoy the adrenalin coursing through his body and driving out the last remnants of his hangover.

Not bad at all! And the bloke didn't half look surprised when he'd told him to say hello to Manga.

Panting hard, he took the flight of steps in five long strides, and his momentum carried him through the station and out onto Rörstrandsgatan, and by the time he

had jogged to St Eriksplan he was soaked in sweat, even if he wasn't particularly out of breath.

He'd always been good at running, ever since school. He wasn't much good at most other things, but he had a decent turn of speed.

The barriers at the underground station were unmanned, so he hopped over the turnstile to get in. He didn't give it a second thought. He'd never paid for commuter trains or the underground, not even when he could afford to. It was a matter of principle. Power to the people!

It wasn't until he was sitting down in the carriage that he realized he still had the phone attached to his belt. He pulled it off and looked at the screen.

Congratulations, HP!
You have successfully completed your trial task and your game account has been credited with 100 points.
The telephone is now unlocked and under the **Game** icon you will find more information about how to continue playing.
We recommend that you read the section concerning the Rules of the Game, and think carefully about whether you want to continue playing.
If you would prefer not to, our paths will go separate ways and we ask you to leave the phone in the letterbox at Bellmansgatan 7.
Best wishes,
The Game Master

'I was thinking about moving you up,' Runeberg said.

'Alpha needs new recruits before Sweden takes over the EU Presidency. You haven't really been in the job long

enough, but after today's events Vahtola and I agree that you're ready. You start on Monday, assuming that Dr Anderberg has no objections on mental health grounds. Any questions?'

She simply shook her head.

'Well done, Normén, if you carry on like this you'll do well here,' he concluded, pushing his chair back from the desk.

'Your debriefing with Anderberg is in ten minutes. Once that's out of the way you can finish for the week. That's all. Right, I'm off to the gym.'

He stood up to indicate that the conversation was over, and Rebecca followed suit. Her head was spinning and she couldn't help letting slip an unprofessional smile.

The Alpha group, the reinforcement team, the elite of the personal protection squad. From Monday she would be one of them. No more beginners' jobs, just serious, qualified bodyguards' work.

Well done, Normén – clever girl!

When she knocked on the psychologist's door nine minutes and fifty seconds later, she was still trying to suppress the annoying impulse to smile.