

1. VIOLA REHNSTRÖM, AGE 27, JUNIOR SUPERINTENDENT, GOTHENBURG POLICE, SECONDED TO UNITED NATIONS POLICE TASKFORCE, STATIONED AT THE HARMONT CONSTABULARY.

A patch of skeletal brambles rocking in the wind was the only thing I could focus on outside the car window. I was so bored, and he was talking...just...talking. Talking to fill the air. He just droned on and on about some godforsaken woman that had given him some modicum of affection in a bar last night. I cared for the guy - no really, I did - but Constable Zuvik had, like many of the officers I worked with, taken me for someone who gave a damn. Or perhaps it was the boredom getting to me. I was grouchy, I admit it but to be fair, boredom was all I could feel. Boredom was all that I *had* felt for several hours now. It was all *anyone* would feel, sitting here all through the night, watching a field full of nothing.

I figured I'd throw the young fool a bone and gave Zuvik another belaboured shrug, said I didn't know, man, and tapped my cigarette out the half-wound window. That'd keep him going for another minute or two. At least he was happy. Me, I just kept looking at that bramble patch, hoping something, anything, would change. After a while, I gave into temptation and looked at my watch - half five. Only an hour and a half more to go.

"Hey Zuvik," I said, interrupting him, "What's left in the flask?"

The constable obediently leaned down into the footwell and picked up a tin container, swilled it around to check the contents, and shook his head.

"Only a dram. You want it?"

"No. Probably cold anyways."

"I'll add something for you. Got a flask of my own right here."

He reached into his jacket pocket.

"No thanks."

"You sure you don't need it? After listening to me for however long I've been talking, I'd probably need it."

Well, shit, I couldn't help but give the bastard a smile. At least he admitted his guilt.

"Just ask her out. Worst thing that can happen is she says no."

He appreciated my advice, it seemed, and sank back into his seat. Trust Zuvik to seek a mother's advice from the only woman in his life that wasn't his mother. Still, he was a decent police officer. I'd have picked him over most others in the Harmont force.

As my cigarette - my twenty-second or third of the night - shrank to a stub, I sighed, then slid my wrist through the cracked window, extinguished it on the roof and flicked it out onto the road. The car was cramped, so as I wriggled to free my cigarette packet from my trouser leg pocket, I cursed whatever hell-spawned quartermaster that had supplied us with them,

"Let's go for a walk." I said to Zuvik.

"What, now?"

"Yes, now."

We both got out from the car and adjusted ourselves to life outside that cold metal box. I rubbed my eyes, fumbled with my lighter and lit up, whilst he stretched himself out like the king of the Jews. I offered him a smoke, and he obliged, then I threw the packet back into the car. Officially, we were meant to stay in our cars unless there was cause for alarm, but I knew Zuvik wouldn't squeal. He valued my advice too much.

The wind slowed and the bramble patch stopped its incessant waving. We walked along the road for a while - north, away from Harmont. It was a foggy morning, and there wasn't much to see beyond the two-dozen yards in front of you, but it was better than sitting around. The wind picked up now and then as we walked in silence. The sound of the rustling leaves and branches were like music after the hours of inane banter. Perhaps next time I'll sleep for a few hours, I thought, let whatever unfortunate soul I was partnered with that day do the work.

As we reached the end of the field, the buildings of the hamlet down the road became visible through the fog. My watch said six o'clock. The working men were likely waking up, now, and emerging from their beds as we had emerged from our car. Getting ready for work at a reasonable time, kissing their wives...*showering*. What I wouldn't have given for any one of those things at that moment. Such basic luxuries were not often afforded to us as officers. Still, this assignment was, despite its dragging nature, a relatively welcome one. The hamlet was most assuredly on the relocation list: it'd only be a matter of time before we were back here in a less-friendly capacity. While they were grateful for our presence at their border, these people would not easily be convinced to leave their homes when the time came.

Zuvik kicked a can along the road - some rusted piece of rubbish - and it skidded along the concrete, making a racket.

"Cut it!" I hissed, "You want to pick a fight with some barely-awake miner? He'd kick your ass."

"Sorry, boss."

We turned back, and made our way to the squad car. Zuvik was still finishing his cigarette by the time we reached the car, so I leaned in to grab the packet and lit another for myself without offering him one. I checked my watch again. Damn. Only six minutes had passed since we'd turned back from the hamlet. Sometimes I wished for some sort of time machine - not one which would allow me to travel back and forth, but simply one that would accelerate things, some tool to widen the hole in the hourglass.

Walking along, I looked out across the field and imagined the many applications of such a tool. It was hardly a fantasy, these days. Perhaps, I wondered, some aspiring stalker would emerge from the foggy field with exactly such a device. I'd have paid him handsomely, and sworn Zuvik to secrecy, lest I reveal his romantic ineptitude to his mother. But no such criminal materialised.

So we continued walking. We didn't talk, just smoked our cigarettes and walked. After all, there was nothing left to talk about. Zuvik had been giddy from the moment he sat down in the passenger seat, eager to talk about his girl - who she was, what she'd said, what he'd said, what dates they'd go on and how he'd take her to Italy and marry her if he could - and now he'd told me. Clearly, the man needed a friend.

So - perhaps against my better judgement - I said to him, "Hey Zuvik. You hungry?"

He said yes, so when we got to the gatepost at the end of the road, we stopped, flicked our cigarette butts to the ground, and turned promptly back.

"We'll go to the bakery - get some pastry, straight from the oven. First of the day - they'll be fresh. Maybe old Márta will fix us some coffee, too. How does that sound?"

It felt like an apology, but I wouldn't tell him that. Our bellies were empty, and we were both in need of some food. So we moved quickly back to the car.

On the way back, I noticed a birdhouse - a small, rickety thing, mounted on a rotting post. There was nothing wrong with it - just that I hadn't seen it on the way out. As we walked, my head

turned on a swivel to watch it. It's an unnerving thing, to have something appear from the mist. Even something as innocent as a small wooden house.

"Zuvik. You see that birdhouse?"

He looked to the field and yes, he said, to no surprise.

"Did you see it as we walked past it the first time?"

"No...what's the matter? Don't tell me you're losing your mind, superintendent."

Perhaps I am, I thought. And we continued walking; this time, I faced forward. The hours were getting to me. How long had we been out here? Ten, twelve hours? We'd rolled up to the spot where we parked just before dusk. I hadn't slept since the night before, so now I was eking out the last drips of energy I had, turning perfectly normal things into oddities.

Sometimes, I felt that I'd made the wrong choice joining the mission to Harmont. There was something sickly and draining about the place. The residents - or at least, those that were left - didn't notice it, of course. Like a frog being slowly boiled, they had no conception of what was happening around them. Not even the sudden appearance of military police in their streets had shaken them. Nevermind, they'd said, to the fences and the checkpoints, to the surveillance and the spooks. Those that remained swore that the Visit had done nothing to undermine their sense of community - even when so many lives had been lost, even when so many people had already left of their own accord. No-one talked about those people. No-one talked about how the town had been covered in a strange, imperceptible miasma. Though I had not been here to see it happen, the town had changed under their noses. No resident of any town back in Europe would shrug their shoulders at the mention of explosions, plague quarters and otherworldly horrors just beyond a loosely-enforced cordon.

We reached the car, got in, and cranked the heater up to full. I checked my watch, hoping this would be the final time. Seventeen minutes past six - that might as well have been twenty, which might as well have been thirty. Zuvik shot me a look. He didn't even need to say it, the sly dog. Alright, I said, alright. We'll go. Nobody would ever notice we'd left a little earlier. And besides, we were hungry.

I started the engine, and we pulled off. The road was narrow, so I headed for the hamlet, where there was a round-about big enough to turn. As we drove, Zuvik was beaming, the simple sod. I couldn't help but knock him down a peg, but kept it jovial.

"What? The promise of a pastry and you get all giddy? I didn't say I'd pay for you, asshole."

We glided slowly through the hamlet, in low gear so as not to wake the sleeping women and children. A miner, dressed in overalls, was locking the door to his house as we passed him, and gave us a wave. There was no doubt he would suspect us of something - or at least think us odd - as we passed on him again on the way back, but he said nothing. Zuvik wound the window down and half-whispered a good morning, but received no reply.

We drove on, through the hamlet and back onto the road we'd been parked all night. The fog had begun to lift a little, so I went a little harder on the gas. But when we passed the bird-box again, I slowed down.

"What's wrong?" Zuvik asked.

"Shut up." I said, eyeing the birdhouse again.

"Do you see something?"

"I said shut up."

There was nothing. Nothing had changed - there it was, the same birdhouse, in the same spot, with its same aging wood frame. I drove on and cursed myself for being so suspicious.

By the time we reached the outskirts of Harmont, the fog had lifted almost completely. We rolled into town just as the lights started to flicker on in the houses. As we came to the crossroads by the bakery, we both inhaled, smelling the baking bread. We were already tasting it.

“By god, that’s a welcome smell. Pretty good, huh boss?” Zuvik said.

I pulled up onto the pavement beside the bakery and we got out. Zuvik tried the door, but it just rattled.

“Márta! Márta! Come on out!” he shouted, “Let two hungry policemen have some breakfast, will you!”

Behind the counter, from the back-room, Márta appeared. A squat old woman - a real babushka, if I ever did see one. She cursed him and shooed him away from the door as she pulled out her keys. Zuvik, to his credit, bowed his head and smiled as she approached. So much for a secret breakfast - the whole neighbourhood probably heard him shouting - but at least we’d get it. And it didn’t take old Márta too long to prepare us a selection of pastries and cakes, either. She probably gave us one of everything she had in the display. As ever, we could rely on her to fill our bellies full. All it cost us was a sloppy kiss on my cheek as I entered. She’d refuse payment, I knew, so I didn’t complain.

Dawn came, and Zuvik chomped on an Alexandertorte like a bloodhound - no manners at all. Not that I cared, particularly. As the street lights went off, we sat back, having demolished the platter. Old Márta came over with two mugs of coffee, and we sat in silence for a while. Much better than sitting in that cramped car, I thought to myself. Just as long as he didn’t start talking about his girl again.

“Hey boss, do you have...you know? A guy?”

Oh lord. Nevermind. Talk to me about your girl, Zuvik.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, like...with me and Alisa.”

“Who’s Alisa?” I teased.

“Alisa Rumata! The one I’ve been telling you about all night! What, don’t you listen at all?”

“I’m joking, I’m joking.”

He stewed for a bit, then asked, “So aren’t you going to tell me?”

“Don’t be nosy, constable.”

“What, don’t tell me you’re a...what do they call women bachelors, anyways?”

“Spinster, probably. Or worse.”

“Nothing wrong with being single, boss.”

I checked my watch. Nearly time to be back at the station.

“I’m not. But thanks for the sympathy. Now drink up. And wipe your damn mouth, you’ve got flakes all over your beard. You don’t think Lieutenant Quarterblad’s gonna miss that, do you?”

He snapped a hand up to his mouth and wiped it, took a big swig from his mug and winced a little at the heat.

“Ready?”

“Not really.”

Despite his protest, he stood up, and I called Márta from the back

“Hey Márta. We’re off. What do we owe you?”

“Nothing, nothing! Go on! Don’t be late!”

Predictable and as sweet as ever. And so we went out into the light of the morning. It was sunny enough that we had to shade our eyes as we walked to the car. We got in, flattened our bellies and, as I turned the key, there was a crash of static. The radio jumped to life, and Lieutenant Quarterblad’s voice sputtered out of it.

“...-are you? Damn it, answer me, you shits!”

Ah, shit. Caught in the act. I lifted the receiver, pressed the button down and spoke into it.

“Receiving you, lieutenant. Go ahead.”

I checked my watch - almost seven. Zuvik remained silent, as guilty as I was.

“Rehnström! I’ve been trying to get you and Zuvik for twenty minutes now. Where the fuck have you been?”

“Just on our way back from Maddock Cote.”

“Bullshit. You left early, didn’t you?”

“Ah...” I started, pausing to feign checking my watch for the first time in the conversation, “...yes, I suppose we did. By a couple minutes or so, sir.”

“You fucking asshole. You’re a bad liar, Rehnström. What, did you think breakfast was more important? No, don’t answer that. I know Zuvik does. But of you I expected better.”

“I’m sorry, lieutenant.”

Zuvik chimed in with a mumbled apology, too.

“Whatever. It’s not my neck on the line, here. Major Bormashenko has a bone to pick with you. Something happened.”

“At the Cote? But we were only gone for, what, an extra half hour? What happened?”

“Just come on back to the station, asshole.”

“Yessir.”

The radio cut out, and I stowed the receiver. Zuvik said nothing, and we sat in silence for a moment. Then I started the car, and we drove off at a pace. The station was on the other side of town, more or less. We didn’t say anything until after we’d passed through the centre. And even then, it was strained.

“What do you think happened?” Zuvik asked.

“I don’t know.” I replied and thought about the birdhouse.

We arrived at the station about ten minutes later, parked up round the back and headed inside. The station was almost empty, as would be expected at this time in the morning. Harry Sporzynski, or as he was more affectionately known, Sporky, was on the desk. He’d probably been up all night, just like we had, the poor bastard. He buzzed us through to the back with nothing more than an upward nod. If Sporky wasn’t talkative, we were truly boned.

Zuvik trailed behind as we went up the stairs, and when we reached the Major’s office, he took a big breath.

“Chill.” I told him, and rapped on the door.

The response was immediate: “Enter.”

We stepped in, and there was Major Bormashenko, standing behind his desk with Quarterblad hanging nearby. The Major was in the middle of packing a briefcase.

“Junior superintendent Rehnström, constable Zuvik. Welcome back. Would you like to explain to me why you abandoned your post?”

He clipped his briefcase shut, and moved around to the front of the desk.

“No good explanation, sir. It was quiet enough, so we left early. It won’t happen again.”

The major gave a haughty sniff and shook his head.

“I’m going to fix your mess.” he said, and shoved his way past Zuvik.

For a moment, we were left with Quarterblad, who promptly followed the Major out. On his way, he paused for a second, gave both of us a stern look and spoke quietly.

“A miner at the Cote is dead. Go home, both of you. Get back here at midday and drive down there. We’ll be there. So will Harmont Radio and the newspapers, I imagine. I trust you’ve eaten.”

There wasn’t enough time to respond, but I’m not sure what I would have said anyway. We were left alone in the office, so I turned to Zuvik and ran a hand through my hair.

“We screwed up.” Zuvik said.

“Yeah.”

We went back out through the front door, to our own cars. There was even less to say than we had on the way to the station.

“Alright, see you in...” I said, checking my watch, “...five hours?”

“Yeah. You think you’ll sleep?”

I just shrugged, and we went our separate ways.

As I drove back, I couldn’t stop thinking about that damn birdhouse. I wasn’t a suspicious person, but...what was that? An omen? How could such a normal, inconspicuous thing be...anything? Maybe I was losing my mind. Or maybe I was just too tired to function, I don’t know. I tried to recall the hamlet as we’d driven through it, scanned my memory for anything out of the ordinary. Was the miner that had waved to us the one that had died? How could he possibly have injured himself? What evil thing could have crawled out of that field in the short time we’d been gone? Could we even have stopped it if we’d been there? But more importantly, what the fuck even happened?

As I passed a bar, I half-considered calling in, but found the strength to drive on by. Instead, I lit up another cigarette in the car and held it above the steering wheel as I drove. I went back to my suite at the Metropol, numbed my mind with some television for half an hour, then drifted off in the chair. I woke a couple hours later, after some fucked up dreams, and set an alarm.

The dreams resumed: a street in a bad neighbourhood back home that was also my childhood bedroom, conversations with celebrities, a garden centre. Then the confused images gave way to my living room, and the sound of the alarm bell. My watch said half eleven. By the time I’d dithered about, there was no time to shower, so I patted down my uniform and went straight back out.

Zuvik was already on the footsteps of the station when I arrived. He sat with his head in his hands, but quickly snapped up when he saw me.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

We got back into the squad car, which was like a second home to us at this point. At my insistence, he took the wheel and we went back along the country roads to the hamlet. The conversation remained sparse.

“Did you sleep?”

“A little.”

“Shower?”

“No.”

It had turned into a sunny day. On any other day, it would be quite enjoyable. But as we pulled up on the road, a few hundred metres short of the gatepost we'd walked to earlier that morning, we saw what a mess our indiscretion had caused. There was a small crowd gathered at a barrier. Beyond that, a couple officers dressed in Harmont uniforms and another couple with blue helmets. I caught the eye of one of the U.N. officers as we approached - a Korean man by the name of Park Hong-jin. He had come to Harmont at the same time as I had - just from the other side of the world. We moved around the crowd, hopping over the barriers at the side. Hong-jin slung his machine gun and offered a hand as I climbed over. Zuvik followed, somewhat more clumsily.

“Viola, Hans.” he greeted us, “You just missed the Major.”

“Just as well. I doubt he would have been happy to see us.” Zuvik replied, as I craned my neck to get a look at what was happening down the road. There was a military-green tent in the road about half the way down to the hamlet, blocking the view. A couple more officers stood around it. Across the fence, parallel with the tent, was the birdhouse.

“You were on watch here last night?” asked Hong-jin quietly, so as not to arouse the ears of the gathered civilians, who fidgeted and listened for gossip.

“Yeah.”

“Don't beat yourself up,” Hong-jin said, and lowered his voice, “They say it was a zombie.”

“A *zombie*? You idiot. What have you been watching, Park?” I said, “Too much late night television.”

“You know...something from beyond the barrier. A man...or something that was a man, once.”

Zuvik looked petrified, but the suggestion was absurd. There were no undead beyond the barriers, only people. People that had been maimed, perhaps, but no spirits that inhabited dead bodies. I was disappointed in him, and said as much.

“Tell that to the miner. Go see if you're not convinced. They haven't let me in.”

Of course he hadn't seen the body.

We moved on, leaving Hong-jin to administer the crowd. As we neared the tent, Quarterblad emerged from the flap door and waved us over.

“You two. Good. Come here.”

I shot one last glance toward the birdhouse as we approached, then snapped my attention to the lieutenant. He held up an open palm, gesturing for us to enter the tent.

“The fruits of your lack of labour.”

We went inside. At the centre was the body of a man, face down on the concrete. His shirt was torn up - shredded, almost. Between each shred of fabric there was blood, and on the concrete below, more blood. One might have forgiven Hong-jin for calling it a zombie, except this man was very clearly dead.

Around the tent, hanging on the sidelines, were some scientist types, armed with clipboards and cameras. It wasn't often you saw them at this sort of thing - the scientific presence in Harmont was surprisingly small. Not at all like the gigantic institutes they had on the borders with other Visitation Sites. Perhaps the whitecoats just didn't have that much interest. After all, the biggest discoveries of the past few years were made in places where the meddling interests of private citizens and local government were far less troublesome. It seemed that every other day we got

some headline from Greenland or Sierra Leone about some wonderful new technology that could be derived from the Visitors' junk. Here, all we got were bodies.

As we entered, Zuvik struck the back of his hand to his mouth in disgust. This wasn't the first body I'd seen - not even the first one in Harmont - but the bodies of frostbitten homeless sleepers or vomit-choked drunks back in Gothenburg weren't ever as grisly as this. Quarterblad entered behind us and we shifted round the cordoned-off area to allow him space. I tried to get a good look at the dead man's face, but it was squashed into the concrete. No way to tell if it was the man we'd seen, but I couldn't shake the feeling that it was.

Quarterblad looked down glumly at the man. "One of the wives from the village called just after half past seven. Heard shouts and screaming from down the road."

"Why was he out on the road?" I asked, "...surely he doesn't walk to the quarry?"

"No-one knows."

"And no suspects?"

"Only one...the bird."

"The bird?"

A vision of the birdhouse came to me again. I fixed Quarterblad with a questioning look as he stepped over to a folding table at the side of the tent. He picked up a metal tray with a white cloth over it and brought it over.

"The wife found him like this...with a big black bird on his back, pecking at him."

He pulled the white cloth off, revealing an array of ragged black feathers: part of a detached wing.

"What the hell is that?" Zuvik asked, peering over my shoulder.

"The bastard's wing. Gorski - that's the miner - must have ripped it off in the fight. There are marks all over him, indicating he fought with it."

Zuvik was exasperated: "He was killed by the bird? Are you kidding me?"

"That's what the ambulance crew said. Who else? You think one of the wives did this? That's what they said - bled out from trauma to his jugular. The eggheads say it's consistent with the behaviour they've seen of birds inside the restricted area."

A moment of silence hung in the air, and we all looked again at the corpse. Then the lieutenant placed the tray back on the table and left the tent, indicating for us to follow.

Outside, he opened his cigarette packet and offered us both one. We obliged, and still the silence hung...until Zuvik cut in.

"I'm sorry, lieutenant. It was my idea to leave."

Quarterblad frowned, flicking the ash from his cigarette to the ground.

"And it was Rehnström that allowed you to. Make no mistake, you two are going to catch shit for this. You're going to have black marks for years, both of you..."

Wordlessly, without coordination, we both bowed our heads like schoolboys caught roughhousing in the playground.

"...the Major has been answering up the chain all morning. Fortunately for you, it's also worked in our favour. This village has been pushed up the list - we'll be serving eviction notices within the week. With any luck, this'll expedite things for us. Maybe even get you home sooner."

Those last words were tinged with a little venom, but I shook it off. It was no secret to anyone that Quarterblad, being a native of Harmont, was disapproving of the presence of international officers like myself and Hong-jin. Still, he rarely let it get in the way of his job.

“So what’s the next move?” asked Zuvik.

Quarterblad stamped his cigarette into the tarmac, “Go see the chinaman, he has the keys to the party van. Take two guns from the locker, then I want you over the heath. You’re going on a bird-hunt.”

I almost asked him if he was serious, but something told me he was. There was a little crack of a smile as he said it. He liked the idea of sending us up into the hills, as far away from civilisation as you could get without actually going into the Zone. Maybe he really wanted us dead - hoped that we’d run into something worse than a crazed bird.

“Not my idea, but it’s a good one.” he continued, “The Major wants you out of the way. Go through the village, avoid the press. Between the two of you, I should hope you can track down one injured bird. Hell, just kill the meanest-looking one you find - it’ll help us sell the idea that everything’s fine.”

Zuvik had remained uncharacteristically quiet. I wondered if the sight of the body had spooked him. Had he seen one before? He stared vacantly as ash spilled from his cigarette.

“What do we do with it?” I asked the lieutenant.

“Right, right, ask Park for a camera, too. They should have one in the van. Get a good photograph. Something we can give to the papers. Make it look dead, but not *too* dead. Not something that would freak people out, you hear?”

“Alright,” I said, and stamped out my own cigarette. I looked to Zuvik and, seeing him still staring into space, I jabbed my elbow into his side. He dropped his cigarette and looked up.

“Let’s go.” I said.

Maybe Hong-jin was right about undead men, I thought, as Zuvik shuffled behind me. Once we were out of earshot of Quarterblad I asked if he was alright, but in response he only gave a grunt.

The crowd at the barriers had thinned a little, but there was a bristling as we approached - they probably thought we were coming to give a statement or something. Hong-jin turned to see us and I waved him over. We walked over to the van and I explained our task.

Hong-jin wasn’t joking when he spoke: “He wants you gone. Really gone.”

I sighed, “Yeah, you too, buddy. He called you ‘chinaman’ again.”

“Prick. He has no respect. Why do you locals have it out for us, Zuvik?”

The constable just shrugged his shoulders. Something was up with him.

“I’d like to see them cope without us.” I said as Hong-jin stepped up to unlock the doors of the van.

“Hey, I hear the English and Americans do fine. They don’t have any blue helmets there.”

“Too prideful.” I suggested, by reflex. In truth, I had no idea why or how any nation would refuse international cooperation. Answers to questions like that were far beyond me.

Hong-jin moved through the back of the van to the weapons locker affixed to the cabin wall.

“Two shotguns, you say? Are you sure you don’t want machine guns? You’ll be just as impotent with either.”

“Shotguns. Let’s not overcomplicate things. And a camera.”

Dutifully, the Korean unlocked the cabinet, retrieved two weapons and passed them to us. Zuvik hesitated before taking it, so Hong-jin held back the gun. Noticing his listlessness, I nudged him again, but he was still zoned out.

“Hey listen, Zuvik, if you’re not okay, head home. I can handle this.”

Hong-jin cut in, speaking to Zuvik: "I'll go with her. Don't worry."

"I'm fine." he replied to us in monotone, making no eye contact.

"You're not." I said.

He insisted he was, saying "I am, I am. It's just a shock."

But Hong-jin was even more insistent.

"Shock is what they had in the Great War. It's no joke, Zuvik. If you're not in the right mind, I won't hand you a gun."

It went on like this for a while, and I eventually relented, letting Hong-jin, in his authority as an impromptu armorer, take the lead. Eventually, we exited the van with only one gun; Hong-jin locked the doors and Zuvik sat down on the step below them. I sat down beside him as Hong-jin headed back to the barrier with the promise that he and I would meet for a drink at the Metropol next time we were both off-shift.

"If you're coming," I said to Zuvik, "we'll take it slow. It's okay if you need to take some time. We don't have to talk."

"I'd rather talk."

"Alright, so we'll talk. Either way, we should go before Quarterblad realises we've not left."

I handed him the camera that Hong-jin had retrieved for us. He slung the strap over his shoulder as I did the same with the shotgun. We slipped between the vehicles clustered around the tent and started on our way toward the hamlet.

As we walked, I was struck with a sense of *deja-vu*. In almost every way, the road was the same as it had been several hours earlier. But the feeling had changed.