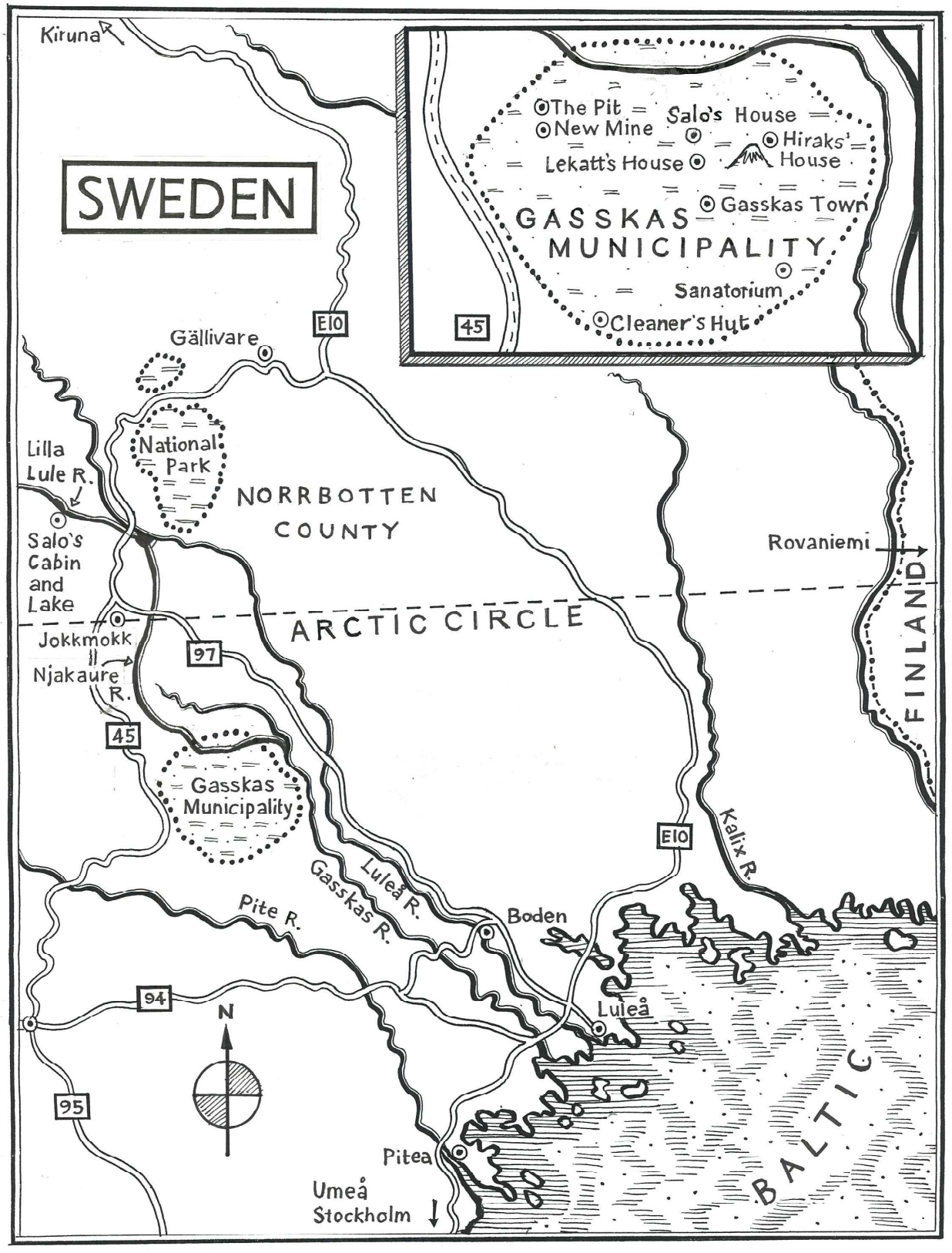

Kiruna
SWEDEN
The Pit
New Mine
Salo's House
Hiraks' House
Lekatt's House
GASSKAS MUNICIPALITY
Gasskas Town
Sanatorium
Cleaner's Hut
45
E10
Gällivare
National Park
Lilla Lule R.
NORRBOTTEN COUNTY
Salo's Cabin and Lake
Rovaniemi
ARCTIC CIRCLE
FINLAND
Jokkmokk
Njakaure R.
97
45
Gasskas Municipality
E10
Kalix R.
Luleå R.
Gasskas R.
Pite R.
Boden
94
N
Luleå
95
Pitea
Umeå
Stockholm
BALTIC

PROLOGUE

"Hi Lisbeth, it's me. It's been a while."

The voice is weak and croaky. His observation is correct: although they were in touch via digital platforms as recently as the autumn, it has been years since their last conversation. But she can hear instantly that it is Plague. Her hacker friend, if there is any such thing as friendship. Maybe the only one she has ever had.

"How are you?" she asks, but misses the answer when she is overcome by a fit of coughing from deep in her tortured lungs, coughing so violent that she has to put down the phone and rush to the sink to spit out gobs of viscous phlegm.

"Sorry," she says, quite some time later. "Are you still there?"

"You sound ill, not like you." As if he knows what's actually like Lisbeth and what's not. Armour-plated exterior, a face almost devoid of expression. A shell that keeps the outside world at a distance in a robotic, barely human way.

The contents of that shell can be glimpsed only when a rare crack opens.

Through years of occasionally crossing paths, they understand more about each other than most. Still, he knows very little about Lisbeth as a person, the one she has become or chooses to be. It's almost comforting to hear that she can catch a cold like any other human being.

"That's what happens when you hang out with walking sources of viral infection."

"I take it you're thinking of someone specific," he says, hoping for a way in. Her inaudible grunt gives way to another coughing fit.

"How about you?" she asks once she has recovered sufficiently. "Phone calls aren't usually your thing, but then again it *is* nearly Christmas. Happy Christmas to you too."

He can't help laughing. Typical Lisbeth, always on the attack. Always one step ahead, a way of making sure she can keep the doors closed.

"Do you mean Svala?" he says. "The walking source of infection?"

"Could be. But Blomkvist's down with it too. We must have picked up some foul thing on the train back from Gasskas."

"So you two are still in touch?" he says.

"No."

"Yeah, right."

"Did you ring for a reason?" she says, heading back to bed. There's something in his voice, a tone trying to make its way through her snot-clogged, fever-hazed brain.

"Just wanted to make sure you were alive."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

He's e-mailed her. Several times but had no reply. The break in contact coincided with his own failed attempt to hack into the Branco Group's computer system. The silence made him anxious. But the momentary relief he felt when she answered his call is turning into something else. As she pointed out, he is not the type to ring his acquaintances for a chat. He is a creature of the darkness who stays in his cave. The kind who never pokes out his head to sample his surroundings. He can tell her suspicions have been aroused.

"Anyway, I've been thinking about you and I just wanted to check everything was alright," he says, and immediately regrets it. His words ring as false as he feels: a traitor who has betrayed his best friend. She asked for help. But something – someone – got in the way. He could blame his own fear. Not particularly credible. His life has never been of much importance. Alive or dead, it's all pretty much the same to him.

The passing years are nothing but a distance to be covered. She knows that. Maybe he should come clean.

"Be in touch," she breaks in, and ends the call. The audience is over.

The short December day turns to evening. Between spells of feverish sleep she lies awake in the darkness and tries to get her thoughts in order.

One part of her, the part which, against her will, has softened into a more conciliatory Lisbeth, tries hard to take the words for what they potentially are: a friend ringing up to ask how she is. Is that an utterly ridiculous proposition? No, or, well, yes, unless Plague has undergone a complete metamorphosis, which is possible but not likely. He was fishing for something. It takes her back to the experiences of the autumn, which she has done her best to forget.

Svala carrying her dying mother through a burning bunker.

Mikael Blomkvist getting shot as his grandchild is abducted by masked men.

Herself in the arms of a police officer.

And finally, Plague.

He has been at her side. She put her trust in his incorruptible integrity. They have eaten from the same pizza boxes. Solved problems that would make students of AI green with envy. She has so much to thank him for: her life, her freedom. But still, something isn't right.

Once this crappy virus is out of her system, she's going to find out what.

*

Christmas is coming and presents are being wrapped. The Residents' Association would like all members to think about their recycling. Christmas string belongs in the general waste because it contains plastic and glue, but wrapping paper can be recycled as long as no sticky tape is left on it. With this we wish you all a joyful Christmas. Best wishes, your Chairman Per.

Lisbeth crumples the note into a ball, hurls it at the draining board as hard as she can and roundly curses the imminent arrival of Christmas. Its ugly mug pokes in everywhere, turning the city into a winking inferno of festoon lights, decorated trees and kiddies' sparkling eyes in wheedling posters on the Tunnelbana. Whether you're buying a piece of jewellery at NK department store or a litre of milk at the Co-op, the transaction ends with "Happy Christmas". This revolting and absurdly hackneyed little phrase makes Lisbeth scowl and the music is even ghastlier. Who the hell seriously thinks Rudolph's red nose is going to make anyone spend more? It's as if the whole of Stockholm has morphed into some sort of Guantánamo detention camp with its own sonic torture regime. From the end of November until the yuletide hell is over, her custom-made, noise-cancelling headphones remain clapped over her ears. A little present she treated herself to a few years back. Well worth the million or so kronor. Music sounds amazing through them, apparently. But silence is what she's after.

Normally she would never venture out into the melee of physical Christmas shopping, but the flu made her lose track of time and suddenly it's too late to order online.

Christmas prompts associations to Rovaniemi, and Rovaniemi prompts associations to Svala (and unfortunately also to a slippery Greek-Chinese guy, the low-water mark of her year).

She could have made things easier for herself and sent money. Any amount. If not for the fact that she knew Svala would take it as an insult. The girl wants something personal. Nothing expensive or spectacular. Personal. Lisbeth asked if she had any wishes. "For you to come up," was the answer but no, she doesn't feel up to it. Her body can barely drag her as far as Kjell & Company home electronics store at the Skyscraper. It certainly couldn't cope with the crush on public transport heading north.

Every now and then she stops and gasps for breath. Two more days, she tells herself. Two more days and then she'll be back at the gym.

She has the shop assistant wrap the package. Makes her way to the post office counter in Ringen shopping centre and shells out a small fortune for express delivery to Gasskas. For a while, her guilty conscience is assuaged. She feels a sense of satisfaction. The Christmas present couldn't be more personal. And it will be bloody useful to the right sort of person. Someone like Svala.

1

There is a special place in hell for CEOs and venture capitalists. Men with webbed feet and arms that double as wings.

Like migrating birds they take off as soon as the weather changes, but new ones always replace them. The sort who defy the cold and roll up their sleeves as the biting wind whines all around.

Prospectors who can smell money. Big money, or they would have stayed in the sun.

Like diviners, they put their ear to the granite and say, "Here". "Here lie such extraordinary riches that no-one will be able to refuse."

When the fun is over, when the seam has dried up or the metal prices have fallen, they won't be the ones standing in a packed canteen telling those assembled that times are hard. They have a whole HR department to do their dirty work. They are already far away. Far from poisoned watercourses and contaminated ground, far from unemployed miners whose lungs have breathed in silica, asbestos and diesel fumes.

The directors and venture capitalists are already on their way to new places, other mountains. Using different company names.

With a fresh set of board members and a bundle of new money to wave under the noses of politicians, they are once again welcomed as heroes. Heroes who will take sparsely populated municipalities to new economic heights, create jobs and inject some belief in the future.

*

It is night. Several degrees below freezing even though it is well into May. The grass crunches as he takes the path through the forest, his destination in sight a few hundred metres upstream along the Njakaure. A river that flows past the decommissioned Gasskas mine, commonly known as "the Pit".

In the bright moonlight, buildings and spoil heaps tower up as if in some abandoned alpine village. From his vantage point he cannot see the Pit itself, and that is intentional.

He feels a sudden shiver of nerves, but he wasn't born yesterday. He knows what he's doing. Only he needs a little rest first. He shrugs out of his rucksack, unfolds his seat and rummages for the Thermos flask.

A couple of cups later, he feels restored. His pulse is even. The air is good.

He drags the canoe from its hiding place under a spruce, where he left it last year. In the end there was only one trip. He examines the bottom for any damage. Drags the canoe down to the water and ties it to a tree so he can pause to get his breath back.

The water ripples around the hull as he pushes off with the paddle. Now he can take it easy and float with the current a few hundred metres down to the bridge.

The bridge over the stream is said to date to the eighteenth century. When the mine began operating at the end of the 1940s, the bridge assumed its current form. Reinforced with iron girders to withstand the pressure of fully loaded ore trucks on their way down to the coast. From below he can see the stonework of the old bridge structure. Beautifully proportioned blocks of granite fitted perfectly to each other, built in an age when beauty was valued.

He brings the canoe to a stop. Slowly, so as not to lose his balance, he puts the straps of the rucksack through a rusty iron loop and winds binding wire around it to fix it firmly. That should cope with a load of twelve kilos. No doubt twelve hundred too. Gang members barely into their teens know how to build a bomb, but their awareness of impact

in relation to size of charge will be very sketchy. The risk radius for a gram of explosive is twenty metres. The reason for his own outsized charge is the open terrain. An explosion is more effective in a room, a car or some other enclosed space and he wants to be sure the bridge really will be blown to bits.

He wishes he could stand a little way off and watch it all happen, but he has put the temptation out of his head. Technically it makes no difference if he is killed. He will soon reach the end of his lifespan. On the other hand, there are still a few things on his agenda before the heavenly light receives his soul.

He hides the canoe under a tree again. A few spruce branches wouldn't harm, he thinks, but he can't summon the energy. On the final stretch back to the car he has to stop several times. It isn't that his breathing is wheezy; he has no breath at all.

Cool sheets against a sweaty body. Another cup of coffee. He props up the pillows behind his back and reaches for his prepaid mobile phone.

A quarter past four is a good time for the people of Gasskas to wake to the sound of the next world war. His own war. He puts down the phone. Turns to the wall and listens to the distant bass note of the blast.

Shame to lose a good Thermos, is his final thought before he falls asleep.

Or did he even sleep? The pain has come back.

For a moment he imagined he was free. His concentration had its focus elsewhere, on his exhilaration, draining the power from the stabs of pain in his back and making his cough cower like an exhausted tomcat.

Now it is clawing fresh wounds inside him. A quarter of an hour later he finally gets himself to the bathroom. Takes a pee, shaves while he's there – he's never been a slob – puts on another pot of coffee and waits for the local news bulletin at seven.

*

At 4.15 this morning an explosive charge detonated that was heard and felt across large areas of Gasskas. According to the police it was an extremely powerful explosion, causing serious damage to the bridge over the Njakkaure River that formerly carried trucks of ore from the Gasskas mine.

"We are currently trying to orientate ourselves in the area, to establish that there was no injury to human life. The attack has been categorised as widespread destruction posing a threat to public safety until the cause of the explosion can be established," said Hans Faste of the Serious Crime Unit at Gasskas police.

A decent start at any rate, he notes, and scrolls through the online edition of the local paper, *Gaskassen*. Despite the circumstances, it's going to be a day to relish.

2

Whose idea was it?

Svala's. There were three key factors.

The first: Ester Södergran, who is new to the town and to *Gaskassen* and looking for some different angles. The second: Svala Hirak, who is interning for a few weeks at the paper and helping her out. The third: Lisbeth Salander, who sent a drone as a Christmas present.

"Do you know of any large abandoned properties?" says Ester. "We could do a Saturday feature on haunted houses."

"There must be loads, but I've no idea if they've got ghosts," says Svala.

They make a list. Select the most spectacular. In a municipality like Gasskas there are plenty of abandoned buildings. Mostly cheap chipboard huts and old timbered buildings that are empty for a variety of reasons. An owner with no heirs, a dispute over an inheritance, or a location on a busy road that used to be practical but will barely even sell to the Dutch these days.

The last place on the list is the sanatorium.

Like other sanatoriums, the property is in a remote, elevated position in an attractive setting near a lake.

"'By contrast with its nearby counterpart Sandträsk, which was in operation for fifty years, caring for almost thirty thousand patients, the sanatorium in Gasskas has an obscure place in Swedish medical history.'"

Svala is googling and reading out loud.

"'The thirty-bed sanatorium was built in 1945, mainly to relieve Sandträsk, which was admitting large numbers of refugees suffering from TB. The last patients left in 1963. The building was subsequently used as a residential treatment centre for addicts and as a refugee centre during the Balkan War. The complex has been standing empty since the mid-2000s. Its inaccessibility and state of disrepair have led to proposals for its demolition.'"

"Well, that must have been written before December 2021, when it was apparently sold. Let's get over there. It'll be handy if there's someone there. They might know if it's haunted," says Ester. She carries on typing.

Svala watches Ester's earnest profile, briefly frozen in some thought process, her gaze distant.

Over the weeks of Svala's stint of work experience, a friendship has developed between them. *Like a sister,* thinks Svala. A big sister you can talk to, have a laugh with. One who listens and answers without sarcasm or a wagging, nagging adult finger. Someone who'll message her in the evening and ask what she's up to. Someone who shares stuff, shows her the ropes.

Svala laps it all up. Devises headlines, crafts preambles. Wrangles words into the taut article format.

"Christ, Svala, I mean, I can write but you . . . you're a real artist with words," is the sort of thing Ester will exclaim.

But there's another side she likes even more. Comments like "Shit Svala, get a load of this picture I took, see how fabulous you look," and something stirs in the chrysalis on its way to life as a butterfly.

Something has changed in the way she views herself, and in what she sees in the eyes of others. She isn't invisible any longer.

They take the route the GPS suggests through villages, alongside lakes and over hills until they reach journey's end.

There is even a sign. Two. An old one with the name of the place and

a more recent version telling visitors that it's private land monitored by CCTV. The road is also blocked by a barrier.

"What do we do?" Svala says.

"Park the car and walk."

The front drive sweeps around a circular flower bed, formerly grand with its low, neatly trimmed rowan hedges and fountain but now looking as neglected as the house. There are no human figures or vehicles to indicate any form of life. The winter weather has snapped an aged birch. And the flagpole. There are still drifts of snow in the shadier spots.

"Not a soul," says Svala.

"But plenty of mosquitoes," notes Ester, flapping her arms to ward them off.

Svala lets a mosquito sit on her arm until it has finished its meal.

"The ones waking up now are the overwintering females," she says. "Pretty hungry, I should think."

"Good job there are animal lovers around for them to eat, then," says Ester, delivering a lethal slap to a few more.

They tug at locked doors, do a circuit of the outbuildings but can't even get into those. Occasionally they think they hear sounds. But when they stop and listen, the place is silent apart from the background notes provided by nature.

They go round to the back. The glass in the ground-floor windows has been replaced by chipboard. The plaster is peeling in places, and bits have fallen to the ground.

"Hard to hunt ghosts if you can't get in to them. I guess we'll have to give up or find someone who can unlock the door for us," says Ester, and then comes to an abrupt halt. "Listen. That was a car, wasn't it? Might not be a good idea to let them see us. It's private property, after all."

So they run for the cover of the forest and don't stop until they emerge from the track onto the public road.

Between the trees, they catch sight of the car the newspaper lets them use. And beside it, a man talking on the phone.

There's nothing odd about the situation, not really. Ester jumps the ditch and walks towards the man.

"Hello there," she hails him from a distance, "do you need me to move the car?"

Svala doesn't hear the answer. She waits behind a tree until he has gone.

3

"I still don't get why he had to be so unpleasant" says Ester a few days later when they are picking out shots of different haunted houses. "We didn't even get a picture of the place. We may well need to go up there again."

Svala takes a rather different view of it. "Unpleasant" isn't the right word. She hasn't said anything yet. Not that she identified the man as a particular individual, but that makes no difference. These types are all the same. One step up from Pap Peder, her own late stepdad, a loser who prided himself on looking and acting the part of a real gangster.

With apologies to now-extinct races, Pap Peder is a troglodyte and this man a Neanderthal. The sort who provide him with jobs. *Provided* him, to be more accurate. That skunk is out of the running, at least, but it won't stop others.

Svala's list includes mostly names. People responsible for her mother's death, directly or indirectly. She draws straight lines with her ruler, puts crosses in columns. Of the five possible columns, two are important: *Alive* and *Dead*.

There are others who hold sway over the Neanderthals. Human apes wearing club blazers, signet rings. At the top of the hierarchy are the suits. Those who have been integrated into society, leveraging their capital to be allowed aboard the train to the industrial future. Those currently debating or writing opinion pieces in the papers on

the importance of meritocracy. Which means that minorities, native inhabitants, environmental activists and other opinionated parties are not allowed to stand in the way of those who know how Sweden must develop.

This is when Svala has her idea and mentions the drone that Lisbeth Salander sent up at Christmas, even accompanying her gift with the rhyming verse:

From Lisbeth to my niece.
You can spy on them in peace.

Svala says aerial photos can look cool, especially if you take them at dusk, and Ester snaps up the suggestion.

"I'm sure I could fillet some content on the sanatorium out of other pieces. Or ring Elina."

"Elina Bång?"

"Exactly. The Seeress of Lonesome Fen as she calls herself these days. Good stage name."

This time they turn off and head up a road for forestry vehicles, a couple of kilometres west of the sanatorium. The plan is to skirt the building on foot and make their way up the hill.

"I really hope it's worth the effort. You did test this drone in advance, right?" pants Ester as they plough up to the path.

Svala has tested it, but only at home on the farm. There are still some teething troubles, but the article is supposed to go to press the next day. The hilltop provides an unbroken view of the sanatorium, which is a prerequisite for the drone to follow commands. If it loses contact, it's going to crash.

The location is favourable in other respects too. The last rays of sun cap the roof of the sanatorium with a dome of gold, while the inkiness of the ground stands out in bold relief as ghostly shadows. Svala would

have stories to tell about the presence of the dead, the energy that never leaves the universe, but she refrains. They don't know each other as well as all that.

The drone takes to the air. The buzzing insect homes in on its target.

Svala guides it on a swift circuit of the main building and then brings it back to the hill.

When Ester suggests they venture down for a look, she says no. Abandoned properties don't have CCTV or bars behind boarded-up windows. There must be people here.

The presence of the dead is one thing. The living are a much worse proposition.

"I need to get home, I promised to feed the dogs," she says. "My uncles are out this evening."

They drive back through Gasskas and on to Björkavan. Svala walks past the dog pen on her way in. Takes Aiko up to her room with her. The biggest, cuddliest one. He lies down at her feet. Alone in the house, she empties the memory card of pictures, transferring them to her laptop. She selects a couple for publication and imports them to Photoshop.

What you don't see from the ground is that the building has skylights. The resolution isn't particularly good. It's only when she gets to pixel-magnification level that she sees the silhouettes of human figures.

She closes the lid of the laptop. Sits there for a while, staring out over the yard at Björkavan. Svala's life has got better in many ways. Since the autumn she has been living with her uncles, Per-Henrik and Elias, in the house that was Mammamärta's childhood home. She has inherited her mother's room, her bed. She goes out at night and looks at the stars, the Northern Lights, the moon and the fleeting shadows that move across the yard. There is nothing to fear but much to feel the loss of.

It started with a voice. She called, Mammamärta answered. Now it is the other way round. Svala usually opts not to answer. Mammamärta is a sorrow best consumed in small bites. It's easy to choke on.

It is late but Ester is still awake. She answers right away as if she was waiting for the call.

'The picture quality wasn't good enough," says Svala. "Sorry. I'm afraid you'll have to use stock photos."

Svala can hear her typing and wants to know what she's doing.

"This is crazy," she says. The keyboard clatters. "The sanatorium's owned by Mimer Mining, the parent company of Svea Mining. That lot who got permission to do a test bore at the new mine. If we blow up the building, they might have to abandon their plan. Hah, only joking, but it's interesting anyway, don't you think?"

"Where did you get hold of that information?" asks Svala.

"From Ante, a mate of mine. He's doing some kind of nerdy tech course in Luleå and he's a bloody good hacker. By the way," she says, "you're coming to the meeting tomorrow, aren't you? And don't forget the banner, we'll need it on Saturday. If you like, we can go for a pizza afterwards. I've got a new idea I'd like to talk over with you. Not the simplest thing in the world but . . . anyway, we'll leave it for tomorrow. Sleep well, my little windflower."

My little windflower. A soft, warm feeling runs through Svala's body.

"You too," she says.