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Fremde Seele, dunkler Wald (Dark Forest, Foreign Soul)

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Translated by Steph Morris

‘Bloody Russians,’ Alexander Fischer said, after a long silence, pushing his empty glass across the bar he had stood at since late morning. ‘We’ve always had grief with them! And we’ll have it again...’

It was two pm. Apart from them there was no-one there, only the postman, his tall thin figure just recognisable in the gloom at the back of the pub, in the regulars’ spot, reading the paper in his lunchbreak. Although he’d been there some while, his footprints on the floorboards still hadn’t dried. A leaf had blown under the door – birch.

‘You reckon? There’s been no news there for ages,’ the landlord said, without looking at Alexander; he was standing behind the bar, also reading the paper. His bronzed, speckled bald patch shone as if lit from within. He folded the paper up and took Alexander’s glass, washed it carefully, held it under the tap, filled it and pushed it back towards him.

‘I’ve been reading a book,’ Alexander said, gripping the glass. ‘For decades Russian subs have been turning up in Swedish waters, even quite recently. But that’s just one example of what they’re like: provocative. Always being provocative.’

‘The Russians, you mean?’

‘Yes of course. Who else?’

‘I’ve never heard about the subs.’

‘It kicked off in the sixties,’ Alexander said, let go of the glass and straightened the lapels on his uniform. ‘I must ask my sister about it, she might know more. She’s been living up there a few years, with an American.’

‘In Sweden?’ the landlord asked. ‘I thought you said she was in Vienna.’

‘No, no.’ Alexander reached for his glass again. ‘She left ages ago.’ He examined the glass as if considering something. ‘Do you talk to her on the phone much?’

Jakob didn’t reply. He was sitting on a barstool, head in his hands. Although there was fifteen years between them, the similarity was impossible to ignore. They both had dark hair, grey-blue eyes and an angular, withdrawn face. They were both thin, but Alexander was a good bit taller than his younger brother, though it was still possible Jakob would grow. If

Jakob's eyes weren't open, you might have assumed he was asleep. The fluff on his upper lip looked like dirt he'd forgotten to wash off, or had missed. Alexander gave him a nudge.

'Hey,' he said, 'I just asked you a question.'

'No,' Jakob said, and lowered his hands. 'She hardly ever calls. The last time was in the summer I think.'

'I don't hear much either. It's funny she got in touch yesterday.'

Alexander took a sip, put the glass back down, wiped his lips. 'Give him another,' he said to the landlord.

'He's still got some left.' The landlord looked to Jakob for an answer, but he showed no response.

'It's warm now. Give him a fresh one.'

The landlord shrugged his shoulders, poured a small beer, put it in front of Jakob and took away the half-empty glass. 'You don't have to drink it,' he said, but Jakob already had it in his hand.

'You're right, we might not have heard much, but the Russian bear is just sleeping. I'm sure of it. At some point he'll wake again. Then something will happen, you'll see. They use that image themselves, the Russians, you know? A bear – that's how they see themselves...'

'Be careful what you wish for,' the landlord said. 'War is a terrible thing. My mother lost every one of her brothers in the war. I've never seen one at first hand, but I remember the pictures from Yugoslavia well.'

'I'm not wishing for war, of course not. No-one wants that. No-one wants war. But you know how it is. If it has to happen, it has to happen.'

The landlord sighed. 'Well it won't come to that,' he said. He folded the dishcloth in front of him. 'What about down south there? What's going on?'

'Down there? It's pretty quiet. Just the odd smuggler, a few weapons, some hashish, that kind of thing.' He laughed. 'But just recently we caught someone smuggling tropical hardwood. He had donkeys in his lorry, in great big wooden crates. We knew him; he came through every few weeks. Strange job, right? A comrade – carpenter by trade, only arrived recently – spotted it straight away. The man wasn't a donkey trader at all. The donkeys were a decoy. Jotoba, the wood's called, or jatoba: dark red wood, very pricy. It was all about the crates.'

'Hmm,' the landlord said. 'What happens with someone like that?'

‘We hand him over to the local police. I don’t know what they do with him. Maybe they let him go again if he greases their palms. Perhaps they suggest a different route. We don’t get involved, anyway.’

‘Hmm,’ the landlord said again. ‘As long as it’s quiet, that’s the main thing.’ He sounded as if he was talking to himself.

‘I like it quiet, but it’s getting too quiet for me,’ Alexander said. ‘I’ve applied for a transfer. They’ll probably turn me down. The first application is always refused. You have to try several times.’

‘Where do you want to be stationed?’

‘Further north, on the Serbian border.’

‘You must be tired of life.’

‘Why?’ Alexander had a stretch. ‘In two or three weeks I’ll be going back. As soon as my back is better.’

‘What actually happened?’ the landlord asked.

‘My horse shied,’ Alexander said.

‘Your horse? You still ride horses? Have the clocks stopped down there?’

‘They have actually,’ Alexander said, and something akin to melancholy crept into his voice. He avoided mentioning that the accident hadn’t happened during active duty. He was the only member of the troop who left the camp every few days, with special permission – to go riding. The others preferred to stay in the camp and use the climbing wall or the fitness studio to keep fit and pass the time. ‘They have actually. Anyway now I have to wear this stupid corset and I’m not allowed to sit.’

‘I see.’

From the table at the back came the clatter of cutlery. The postman had stood up, put on his thick coat, the same dark blue as the rest of his uniform, and was searching for something in his pockets. He bent down and looked under the table, then straightened up, returned the paper to the bar, took his leave and left, walking with a limp. As soon as he had gone, the landlord made a tally in a ledger, took the dishcloth and went to the back. Resting a hand on the table top, he too looked under the table, perhaps to discover whatever might have been lost, but found nothing either. He cleared the table and wiped it.

Alexander watched him. ‘We should get going too,’ he said. ‘On the other hand, what are we supposed to do back home in this weather? We could just as well stay here. What do you reckon?’

‘Dunno,’ Jakob said. ‘I don’t mind going home.’

For the first time since they'd got there, Alexander looked more carefully at his brother, and noticed the bored look on his face – he who had always so admired him, who could never get enough of his stories; Jakob could watch photos and videos of exercises and manoeuvres on his phone for hours. Alexander realised Jakob had been sitting there the whole time without showing the slightest interest in what he'd been saying. Despite telling himself this probably wasn't personal, that his brother – how old was he? fifteen? or still just fourteen? – probably had other worries right now, it made him upset, cross even. His good mood was soured.

'Right,' he said drily, 'right.'

He grabbed his glass and emptied it in one go. After a brief hesitation, Jakob followed suit.

'We'll be off,' Alexander said to the landlord, who was busy carrying plates into the kitchen. 'Can you add these to my tab?'

'Yes, that's fine Alexander,' he said, pushing the swing door to the kitchen open. 'We'll sort it out before you leave again.'

Jakob slipped off the stool and dashed for the exit. Alexander took his cigarettes from the bar and followed. Another birch leaf had blown in. It was exactly the same size, and exactly the same shade. Alexander stopped, knelt down, with his torso upright, briefly resembling a tight-rope walker, and picked up one of the leaves. Gazing at the triangular leaf, with its zig-zag border, he righted himself. Jakob was still holding the door open, waiting. Although Alexander could see little of Jakob's face, he could still tell how impatient his brother now was. Like our father, he thought. Just like him. At this he brightened and his anger evaporated. He turned again and made a military gesture of farewell, with a grin. The landlord, leaning over the paper again, merely raised his chin, as if saying, 'I see.'

It was late autumn, and winter was crystalizing from everything around. The only thing in any of the fields was pale, brittle maize. The others lay empty and desolate, as if exhausted, leached for good. There were no people in any of them. Although many of the farms they saw had been renovated, they all seemed deserted now. Only the smell of pig manure, which barely eased as they passed from one to the next, suggested otherwise. They drove the five kilometres without exchanging a word. As soon as the car came to a halt, Jakob got out and vanished into one of the farm buildings. It was still raining. The sky hung low and grey over the wide valley, crossed by a thirty-metre-high motorway bridge. Alexander switched the motor off, pulled the handbrake and shook his head. He couldn't help thinking how his life had been at Jakob's age. It was all a long time ago, and little was the case now.

He had been a pupil at the minor seminary in K, and even as a child people had given him an advance on the respect he would receive when he one day became a priest. How could it happen, that two lives with the same point of departure could take such different paths so early. It amazed him every time. He placed the birch leaf in the central console and slid the cover shut. He got out, locked the rental car and walked between the puddles into the house. He took the backstairs up to his room, stopping to listen. From the kitchen downstairs he heard voices. That would be their grandparents. They were going deaf, and talked loudly. He had to switch on the light in his room; it was noticeably dimmer here than in the village. He shut the door, got changed, and hung his uniform on a hanger. Wearing jeans and a jumper, he went to the open window. It looked out onto a lime tree, its branches brushing the eaves. Cool air blew in through its crown. The rustling and the rainfall drowned out the sound of the motorway. Just every so often a deep, metal drone could be heard, as if somewhere, far off, in a dream perhaps, a monster, a giant, was striding over loose-strewn sheets of metal. You could still smell the sickly scent of rotten asparagus which had fallen out of a truck from some east-European land as it crashed and fell from the bridge.

He hadn't stayed here for long for years. He only came at Christmas, for two or three days, and it felt almost accidental that he was here now. The army doctor had given him sick leave, and Alexander hadn't wished to explain he had no special interest in seeing his family. He did not want to be seen as one of those people who had only gone abroad because they couldn't stand it in their own country, or were running away from something. So he thanked the doctor and thought, 'why not? I can just go the pub once I get there...'

He stood for a while, then shut the window, sat at the desk, and switched on the green-shaded lamp. He sighed with relief. It was great to sit down. He rubbed his arms – it was cold in the room – and poured himself a whisky, glancing at the alarm clock by the bed. The doctor had allowed him three hours a day; he had sat down for an hour that morning, could exclude the short drive, so was still allowed two hours. He took a book from the stack in front of him, opened it where he had left the bookmark, and began to read. Just as he had immersed himself as a child in the bible, in the writings of Christian thinkers and Roman authors, now he immersed himself in books on army command.