PROLOGUE

СССР
ЗНАЧОК ЛАУРЕАТ СТАЛИНСКОЙ ПРЕМИИ
1948
1948

Western Estonia, Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, Soviet Union

We went to Rosalie’s grave one last time and placed some wildflowers on the grassy moonlit mound. We were silent for a moment with the blooms between us. I didn’t want to let Juudit go, which is why I said out loud what a person shouldn’t say in that situation:

“We’ll never see each other again.”

I could hear the gravel in my voice, and it brought a gleam of water to her eyes, that gleam that had often knocked me off balance, welling up and sending my rational mind lightly afloat, like a bark boat. Rocking on a stream that flowed from her eyes. Maybe I spoke bluntly to dull my own pain, maybe I just wanted to be cruel so that when she’d left she could curse me and my callousness, or maybe I yearned for some final declaration, for her to say she didn’t want to leave. I was still uncertain of the movements of her heart, even after all we’d been through together.

“You regret bringing me here,” Juudit whispered.

I was startled by her perceptiveness, rubbed my neck in embarrassment. She’d given me a haircut just that evening, and it itched where the hair had fallen down inside my collar.

"It's all right. I understand," she said.

I could have contradicted her, but I didn't, although she hadn't been a burden. The men had insinuated otherwise. But I had to bring her to the safety of the forest when I heard that she'd had to flee from Tallinn. The Armses' farm wasn't a safe place for us with the Russians advancing. The forest was better. She'd been like an injured bird in the palm of my hand, weakened, her nerves feverish for weeks. When our medic was killed in combat, the men finally let Mrs. Vaik come to help us, us and Juudit. I had succeeded in rescuing her one more time, but once she stepped out onto the road that loomed ahead of us, I wouldn't be able to protect her anymore. The men were right, though—women and children belonged at home. Juudit had to go back to town. The noose around us was tightening and the safety of the forest was melting away. I watched her face out of the corner of my eye. Her gaze had turned to the road that she would leave by; her mouth was open, she was gulping the air with all her strength, and the feel of her breath threatened to undermine my resolve.

"It's best this way," I said. "Best for all of us. Go back to the life you left behind."

"It's not the same anymore. It never will be."

PART ONE

Then Mark, the guard, came and took them one at a time to the edge of the ditch and executed them with his pistol.

—K. Lemmick and E. Martinson, *12,000: Testimony in the Case of the Mass Murderers Juhan Jüriste, Karl Linnas, and Ervin Viks, Tartu, January 16–20, 1962*, Estonian State Publishing House, 1962

ПОЧТА СССР
19
41
КОП

Northern Estonia, Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, Soviet Union

THE HUM FROM beyond the trees was growing louder—I knew what was coming. I looked at my hands. They were steady. In a moment I would be running toward the oncoming column of vehicles. I would forget about Edgar and his nerves. I could see him from the corner of my eye fiddling with his trousers with trembling hands, his face the wrong color for battle. We had just come from training in Finland, where I'd worried whether he would be all right, as if he were a child, but now that we were in combat the situation had changed. We had a job to do. Soon. Now. I took off running, my grenades whacking against my leg, my hand ready to tug one loose from the side of my boot, my fingers already feeling its spin through the air. The Finnish army shirt I'd put on when we were training on Staffan Island still felt new; it gave strength to my legs. Soon all the men would wear only Estonian gear, nobody else's, not the occupiers', not the allies', only our own. That was our aim, to take our country back.

I could hear the others coming behind me, the ground groaning with our power, and I ran still harder toward the hum of the engines. I could smell the enemy's sweat, could almost taste the rage and metal in my mouth. It was someone else running in my boots, the same emotionless warrior who in the last battle had leapt over a ditch to throw grenades at the destruction battalion—cap . . . cord . . . throw, cap . . . cord . . . throw. It was someone else—cap . . . cord . . . throw—and that someone was sprinting toward the column. There were more of them than we'd thought. There was no end to the destruction battalions—Russians, and men who looked like Estonians—no end to their vehicles and machine guns. But we weren't scared. Let them be scared. We had hate running through us, running with such force that our opponents halted, the tires of the Mootor bus spinning in place, our hatred nailing them to the moment when we opened fire. I charged with the others toward the bus and we killed them all.

MY ARMS WERE trembling from the bullets I fired, my wrists heavy from the weight of the grenades I threw, but gradually I realized the fight was over. When my feet adjusted to staying in one place and the shells stopped raining onto the ground, I noticed that the end of the battle didn't bring silence. It brought noise. Greedy maggots making their way out of the earth toward the bodies, the eager rustle of death's minions hurrying toward fresh blood. And it stunk the stink of feces, the reek of vomited bile. My eyes were blinded, the gunpowder smoke was starting to disperse, and it was as if a bright golden chariot had appeared at the edge of the clouds, ready to gather up the fallen—not just our men, but also the destruction battalion men, Russians and Estonians. I squinted. My ears were ringing. I saw men gasping, wiping their brows, swaying like trees where they stood. I tried to keep my eye on the sky, the shining chariot, but I couldn't just stand there leaning against the battered side of the Mootor. The quickest ones were already moving like shoppers at a market. The weapons had to be collected from the dead. The guns and pocket cartridge belts—nothing else. We waded through body parts, twitching limbs. I had just taken an ammunition belt from an enemy soldier when something on the ground grabbed my ankle. The grip was surprisingly strong, pulling me down toward a murmuring mouth. Before I could take aim, my knees gave way and I slid down next to the dying man—as helpless as he was, sure that my moment had come. But he wasn't looking at me. His words were directed at someone else, someone beloved. I didn't understand what he was saying, he was speaking Russian, but his voice was the kind a man uses only when speaking to his bride. I would have known even if I hadn't seen the photograph in his stained hand, the white skirt in the picture. The photo was red with a bridegroom's blood now, a finger covering the woman's face. I wrenched my leg free and the life disappeared from his eyes, eyes where I had just seen myself. I forced myself to stand. I had to keep moving.

When the weapons were collected, there was a rattle of engines again from farther off and Sergeant Allik gave the order to retreat. We guessed that the destruction battalion would wait for reinforcements before making another attack or searching for the camps, but we knew they would come. The machine gunners had already made it as far as the edge of the forest when I saw a familiar figure bent over a still flailing body: Mart. His feet had already crushed the skull—brains mixed with mud—but still he hit and hit with his rifle butt, as if he wanted to put it all the way through the body and into the ground. I ran over and skidded into him hard, which made him lose his grip on the rifle. He bucked blindly, not recognizing me, roaring at an invisible enemy and thrashing the air, but I got hold of him, took my belt off, wrapped it around him, and led him to the dressing station, where the men were hurriedly piling up the things they'd found. I whispered that this man needed looking after, tapping my temple, and the medic glanced at Mart—who was gasping, frothing at the mouth—and nodded. Sergeant Allik hustled the men onward, snatched a pocket flask from someone's hand, and shouted that an Estonian doesn't fight drunk like a Russky does. I started to look for my cousin Edgar, suspecting that he had run away, but he was perched on a rock with his hand over his mouth, his face wet with sweat. I grabbed his shoulder, and when I let go he started to rub his coat with a filthy handkerchief on the spot where I'd touched him with my bloody fingers.

"I can't do this, Roland. Don't be angry."

A sudden disgust sloshed in my chest, and an image flashed through my mind of my mother hiding coffee, brewing it secretly for Edgar and no one else. I shook my head. I had to concentrate, forget about the coffee, forget about Mart, how I'd recognized what I saw in his addled eyes, a man like the one who had run into battle in my boots. I had to forget the enemy soldier who had grabbed my leg, how I'd recognized myself in his gaze, too, and I had to forget that I hadn't seen myself in Sergeant Allik's face. Or the medic's. This was my third battle since coming back from Finland, and I was still alive, the enemy's blood on my hands. So where did this sudden doubt come from? Why didn't I recognize myself in the faces of the men that I knew would survive to see peace come with their own eyes?

"Do you plan to look for more of our men, or stay here and fight?" Edgar asked.

I turned toward the trees. We had a job to do: weaken the Red Army, which was occupying Estonia, and relay information of their progress to our allies in Finland. I still remembered how glad we had been to dress ourselves in our new Finnish gear and form ranks in the evenings, singing, *Saa vabaks Eesti meri, saa vabaks Eesti pind*—Be free, Estonian sea; be free, Estonian land. When we got back to Estonia, my unit only managed to cut a few phone lines; then our radios stopped working and we decided we'd be more useful if we joined up with the other fighters. Sergeant Allik had proved himself a brave man—the Forest Brothers were advancing at a breakneck pace.

"The refugees may need our protection," Edgar whispered. He was right. The crowds escaping through the cover of the forest were accompanied by several good men, but they were moving slowly because they were surrounded—the only way out was through the swamp. We'd fought like maniacs to give them time, holding the enemy back, but would our victory give them enough of a head start? Edgar sensed my thoughts. He added, "Who knows what's happening at home? We haven't heard anything from Rosalie."

Before I had a chance to think, I was already nodding and on my way to report that we were leaving, going to protect the refugees, even though I was sure Edgar had suggested it only to avoid another attack, to save his own skin. My cousin knew my weaknesses. We had all left our fiancées and wives at home. I was the only one using a woman as an excuse to leave the fight. Still, I told myself that my choice was completely honorable, even wise.

The captain thought it was a good idea for us to leave. Nevertheless, my mood was strangely detached. Maybe it was because the hearing in my left ear hadn't returned yet, or because the words of that dying soldier still echoed in my head. It felt as if nothing that had happened was real, and I couldn't get the stink of death off my hands, even though I washed them over and over when we found a stream. The lines on my palms—the life line, the heart, the head—still stood out in dried blood stamped deep into my flesh, and I walked onward hand in hand with the dead. I kept remembering how my feet had run into battle, how my hands hadn't hesitated to make my machine gun sing, how when the bullets ran out I grabbed my pistol, and after that some rocks I found on the ground, until in the end I was pounding a Red soldier's head against the mudguard from the Mootor. But that wasn't me, it was that other man.

I'd lost my compass in the fight, and we were slogging through unfamiliar forest, but I kept on as if I knew where we were going, and cheered up a bit when I heard a bird singing. It wasn't long before Edgar noticed that I wasn't sure of our direction, but he was hardly going to complain. We were safer if we kept our distance from the refugees the destruction battalion was looking for. There was no need for him to say it out loud. A few times he tried to suggest that we should just wait patiently for the Germans to arrive, that anything else we did would be a waste of time, and why take risks at this point? I didn't listen, I just kept going. I was going to the Armses' place to protect Rosalie and her family, and to check on Simson Farm—my own family's place—and if the fighting continued, I would look for a brother I could trust, and join his troop. Edgar followed me, just like he'd followed me over the Gulf of Finland for training. The water seeping up through cracks in the sea ice had turned his cheek pale and he'd wanted to turn back. When our skis froze up, I had hacked the chunks of ice away for him, and we'd kept going, me in front, Edgar behind, just like now. This time, though, I wanted to keep a good distance between us, let his panting fade into the rustling of the trees. My fingers trembled when I took out my tobacco pouch; I didn't want him to see that. The look on the face of the man who'd grabbed my leg came back into my mind again and again. I quickened my pace. My knapsack weighed me down, but still I went faster, I wanted to leave that face behind, the face of a man who may have died from my bullet, a man whose bride would never know where her bridegroom fell, or that his last thought was *I love you*.

There were other reasons that I'd left so willingly, left the others to prepare for the next attack. I already had my doubts about our German allies. They'd sent us to attack the rear of the Red Army with a few grenades and pistols and a radio that didn't work. Nothing more. We hadn't even been given a decent map of Estonia. We'd been sent there to die, I was sure of it. But I followed orders and kept my mouth shut. As if the last few centuries hadn't taught us anything, all the times the German barons of the Baltic had flayed the skin off our backs.

Before I went to Finland, I had planned to join the Forest Brothers, had even imagined leading an act of sabotage. My plans changed when I was invited to join the training organized by the Finns. The sea had just then frozen over, making the passage to Finland easy. I thought it was a good omen. In the ranks of the Forest Brothers there had been a kind of bluster and carelessness that wasn't going to win any wars or drive away our foes or bring anyone back from Siberia or reclaim our homes. I thought the Green Captain took unnecessary risks with his troops. In his shirt pocket he carried a notebook where he wrote down all the information about the men he provisioned and sketched out precise plans for attacks and tunnels. My fears were confirmed by Mart's daughter. She told me that the destruction battalion had found the food records her mother kept, with careful lists of who came to their house to eat, and when. The Green Captain had promised that she would eventually be repaid for the food and the trouble. But now Mart's house was a smoking ruin, Mart himself had lost his mind, and his daughter was among the crowds of refugees somewhere ahead of us. Some of the Brothers mentioned in her mother's provision records had already been executed.

I knew that once Estonia was free again, people of good conscience would want to examine these years, and there would have to be evidence that we acted according to the law. But such thorough record keeping was a risk we couldn't afford. The acts of the Bolsheviks had already proved that our country and our homes were under the control of barbarians. But I didn't criticize the captain openly. As an educated man and a hero of the War of Independence, he knew more about fighting than I did, and there was a lot of wisdom in his leadership. He had trained the troops, taught them how to shoot, how to use Morse code, made them spend time every day practicing their running, the most important skill in the forest.

I might have stayed in Estonia with his group if it hadn't been for his habit of taking notes. And the camera. I'd been with the Forest Brothers for some time when one morning they started talking about taking a group photo. I slipped away, said I shouldn't be in it since I wasn't really part of the gang. The boys posed in front of the dugout leaning on each other's shoulders, their hand grenades hanging from their belts, one of them with his head stuck into the horn of a portable gramophone as a joke. The photo included a proudly displayed knapsack full of communist money taken from the town hall. The Green Captain had given it out in bundles. Take your fair share, he'd told them. This is a repayment for the cash the Soviet Union confiscated from the people.

The captain was a legend, but I didn't want to be that kind of hero. Was it weakness? Was I any better than Edgar?

Rosalie would have been proud to have pictures of my training on Staffan Island or my time with the Green Captain's group of Forest Brothers, but I didn't intend to make the same mistake the captain did. I even tore up Rosalie's picture, though my fingers didn't want to do it. Her gaze had comforted me at many hopeless moments. I would need that comfort if my life were flowing out of my veins into the earth. I needed it now, as we trekked over the stones and moss, now that I'd left our fighting brothers behind. I needed that look in her eyes. Edgar, clomping along behind me, had never carried a photo of his wife. When he showed up at the cabin where I was waiting to leave for Finland, he made it clear that I shouldn't say a word to anyone about his being back in his home province. An understandable worry for a deserter, and he knew how fragile Mother's nerves were. Still, I couldn't imagine doing such a thing myself, not giving Rosalie any sign that I was alive. I could hear Edgar huffing and puffing behind me and I couldn't fathom why he wanted to let his wife believe he was still a conscript in the Red Army. I was in a mad rush to get to Rosalie's house, and Edgar hadn't said a word about seeing his own wife. I half suspected that he was planning to leave her, that he'd found a new girl, maybe in Helsinki. He'd often been out and about by himself there, traipsing off to the Klaus Kurki restaurant. But he never seemed to let a woman cloud his vision, and he didn't go in for drinking like the other men did, you could tell by the freshness of his breath when he came back to our quarters. He also wore the same free clothes that I did, although he had puckered up his mouth when he saw the cut and the fabric. You couldn't take a girl out for a stroll in those clothes, and you couldn't amuse her on twenty marks a day, let alone sample Helsinki's brothels. It was just enough money for tobacco, socks, the bare necessities.

The other men had taken one look at Edgar and decided he was different, and I was afraid he'd be sent away from the island as unfit to fight. I really had to work on him after he split his forehead open with the kick of his rifle butt and turned even more gun-shy. I wondered how he'd managed in the Red Army. And where had he gotten so soft around the middle? Red Army provisions were hardly pure lard and white bread. On Staffan Island his belly had disappeared, since everything in Finland was rationed.

Edgar had been forgiven a lot because he was a talker. When members of the Finnish command became instructors, they let him give a lecture about Red Army insignia, smoothly churning out the Russian words. He even tried to teach the other men to parachute, although he'd never once done it himself. He spent the evenings mastering the falsification of papers for when we went back to Estonia, whispering to me about his plans for an elite group made up of men from the island. I let him blather. I'd grown up with him, I was used to his overactive imagination. But the other men pricked up their ears at his nonsense.

We had plenty of free time, moments when most of the men would gawk at every skirt they saw like she was the original Eve. I passed the time thinking about Rosalie and the spring sowing. That June we'd learned about the deportations. No one had heard from my father since his arrest the year before. At the time my mother had wept, said he should have known to take off his hat and sing when the Internationale played, keep his mouth shut about the potato association, not say anything against the nationalization, but I knew my father was incapable of that. And that was why his house was taken, his son was in the forest, and he was in prison. The Bolsheviks wanted to make an example of him. Then they told people that their land wouldn't be taken away—but who could believe them?

Edgar, on the other hand, wasn't upset about Simson Farm, even though it was the farm that had paid for his school, the student days in Tartu that he had so many stories about. There were a lot of students on the island, not as many men from the countryside. Edgar and the other university boys hadn't seen much of life. You could hear it in the way they laughed at anyone who struck them as simpler than they were. For them, "uneducated" was an insult, and they judged a person by whether he'd made it to the third grade, or higher. Sometimes they sounded like they'd been reading too many English spy novels. They got carried away fantasizing about the secret agents they were going to send out from the island, about how the Reds' days were numbered. And Edgar was right out in front, preaching the gospel. I wrote some of the men off as adventurers, but there weren't any cowards among them, which gave me some confidence. And we mastered the basics. We were all trained on the radio and in Morse code, and although Edgar was clumsy at loading his gun, his supple fingers were well suited to the telegraph. He'd gotten his speed up to a hundred strokes per minute. My clumsy mitts were made for farmwork. At least we agreed about the most important things; we both had the same politics, the same pro-English position.

I had my own plans: where I used to carry Rosalie's photo I now kept loose-leaf notebook paper—carrying the entire notebook would have been foolhardy. I'd also bought a bound diary. I wanted to collect evidence of the destruction wreaked by the Bolsheviks. When peace came, I would turn the documents over to someone who was good with words, someone who could write the history of our fight for freedom. The importance of this task gave me strength whenever I doubted that I'd be a part of these grand plans, whenever I felt like a coward for choosing a course of action that avoided combat, because I knew I was doing my part, something that I could be proud of. I had no intention of writing anything that would put anyone at risk or reveal too many identifiable details. I wouldn't use names; I might not even mention locations. I planned to get a camera, but I wouldn't be taking any group photos. Spies' eyes glittered everywhere, greedy for the gold of dead Estonians' dust.