

INARI

Feb. 1944

I ARRIVED in Inari yesterday, transferred from the penal colony at Hyljelahti. This new camp isn't marked on Finnish maps. It lies about twenty kilometres to the north-east of Inari parish church. The lake is nearby. There is no proper road to speak of, and as you turn towards the camp two large trees hide everything from view. By the trees there are a couple of signposts informing us in German and Inari Sámi that trespassing is punishable by death—Sámi because anyone hiking around here is likely a Lapp trekking across the fells. Whether or not they can read is anybody's guess.

Hänninen was there to meet me. I introduced myself: Väinö Remes, martial official, interpreter. He said nothing, sized me up from head to toe. I imagine I must have looked quite young. We drove along the footpath in a German vehicle. At first the guard on duty didn't react at all, but when he saw the officer his expression changed. You could see from the young German's eyes that he was afraid. On one side of his collar was the insignia of a skull. Hänninen said something and offered him a cigarette. The guard declined. I'm not sure whether he understood any Finnish.

Hänninen explained the same things I already knew. Just as before, the prisoners are segregated into different tents. The

tent on the left is for Ukrainians, the next one along for Soviets and the one after that for Serbs. And there is a fourth tent here too. He didn't tell me anything about that one. I don't know what is in there.

There are no Jews here. Any Jews, or suspected Jews, are transferred to the penal colony at Hyljelahti. There aren't as many prisoners here as there are elsewhere, but more arrive in a continuous stream. According to Hänninen, another consignment of prisoners came by ship from Danzig the day before yesterday, among them Poles and Romanians. From tomorrow they will be set to work building the road to the north. There are a few other camps nearby, one of which is reserved for Germans, race traitors and those convicted of treason. Every Sunday they are rounded up and taken to the county jail in Inari for execution.

You cannot describe this camp without mentioning the smell. The fresh winter air notwithstanding, the stench of death hangs all around. The smell struck me in the face as Hänninen pushed open the door of one of the tents. Right in the middle of the tent, amid a clutter of dirty blankets, stood a strange-looking contraption. I don't know why, but at first I thought it must have been a rubbish bin made of old tin cans. You can make all kinds of things out of tin, but I soon realized that the assemblage in fact served as a small stove. The men slept tight together, some chained to the tent's iron structure and the rest shackled to one another. There was no fire in the stove, though it was freezing cold. The stench coming off the prisoners was so repulsive that I broke out in a coughing fit.

Hänninen told me that people get used to the smell. His eyes were languid and sleepy. I know where a look like that comes

from. I asked him why there was no fire in the prisoners' stove. He replied that yesterday one of the prisoners had brought firewood into the tent without permission.

We continued on our way to a building standing next to a trench cut into the peat, its colourless walls made from long-dead pine trees and with only two windows. Inside the building it was warm. Hänninen stepped into the room and logged my arrival by noting the details in a ledger. I signed the page without reading what it said, and he didn't look at what I wrote either. He's fed up with all this too.

Hänninen impressed upon me that I should always follow orders and that I am here to serve the Germans, not only as an interpreter but also as a guard. He told me the story of another guard, Lars something or other, who had inadvertently leant so far into the guard's booth that he couldn't be seen from afar. Commander Felde, who was to be my superior, had just returned to the camp, drunk, after a meeting with provincial governor Hillilä and Colonel Willamo. He shot the guard on the spot. Hänninen said he had witnessed it himself. He had been with the commander at the time, claimed he still had bits of the boy's brain spattered on his shirt collar. As he told me all this he took something small from the upper shelf, stuffed it in his pocket, then picked up his suitcase from the floor.

Once outside, he handed me my weapons and various other accoutrements. A rifle and a pistol. It was the first time I had ever carried anything like this. In my previous roles, I had had neither permission nor inclination to bear arms. The pistol belt felt surprisingly heavy. We walked in silence towards the guard's booth, where I was due to start a shift. Before we parted ways,

Hänninen took a brown-glass phial from his pocket, a blank label attached to its side. He administered a few drops into his mouth, swallowed and cleared his throat. He looked at me closely, as though he was about to ask if I was cold. I tugged instinctively at my thick coat, beneath which I had pulled on an extra overcoat, and wiggled my toes inside my oiled and waterproofed boots.

Hänninen took his watch from his pocket, glanced at it and wound it up, then gazed at the sky. 'There's a Finnish prisoner here too,' he all but whispered, and I didn't have the chance to ask anything further before he wished me good luck and retraced his own steps back through the gates, walked to the car and slammed the black door shut behind him. The rear lights flared red as a German guard stepped out of the booth, stood to attention and headed back to his barracks for the night. Then I took his place.

It was around three-fifteen in the morning when I saw a solitary shooting star fall from the sky. But I didn't dare make a wish.

This land can no longer afford wishes.

This is a lost land.