

# The Eagle and the Oystercatcher

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# 1

## *Spring 1940*

THEY ARRIVED ON the twelfth of April.

I stood on a low hill overlooking Tórshavn as the two British Royal Navy destroyers pulled heavily into the harbour, hauling their bulks to the island's rocky coast. They were like rocks themselves: cold mechanical rocks, hooking an uninvited rope onto the lives of every islander and dragging us into the throes of the war. The air was heavy that day. It fell in a mist around the mountains, wet upon the low grass roofs of the houses, still rank with the overpowering smell of freshly caught fish. It fell upon heavy expectations and heavy hearts.

I remember the exact spot on the mountainside upon which I stood, and the smell of the damp earth and the shining rocks beneath the worn soles of my boots. I remember what I was wearing and that the buttons of my coat were unfastened and my neck was exposed, chilled to an uncomfortable numbness by the cold rain. Any higher and the three of us would have been lost in the mist, hidden from the scene below us.

I remember the faint rustle of Magnus's great red beard in the wind, and the distant look in his eyes as he surveyed the

town, laid out colourfully even below an overcast sky, beyond our stationary feet. And the entire town looked out with him. To the harbour, at those two destroyers as they loomed through the dense mist which clung so closely to the coast, the sea a tempestuous mess hurling itself ferociously against the rocks and roaring like an awakened giant. In the ships' looming shadows the first oystercatchers of spring hopped along the shoreline as though nothing were amiss. I pursed my lips and mimicked their bright call: the comforting sound of home.

The destroyers were bigger than any manmade thing I had ever seen and I was gripped by a shivering sense of dread to think that man could assemble something so large and commandeering; that man should feel the need to. They dwarfed our little fishing boats into primitive insignificance - their masts now matchsticks, their sails tissue paper - and they did not just fill the vision, these cold-blooded destroyers, they grasped the soul.

Destroyer: that was the day I learnt that English word, and I remembered it instantly. Magnus's English was limited - the little he knew he had picked up from trading with Scotland but even he knew that word. He spoke it with a fragile caution, as though the sounds themselves might be dangerous, and the typical Faroese spin on the letter 'R' rolled off his tongue, through his beard and into the cool, dense air. Orri and I watched it curiously, that snippet of new knowledge, opening up a world that even then seemed dark and confusing. We could see no reason to trust it.

Nevertheless, Magnus's eyes still shone. They always shone, like stars sandwiched between the foliage of his beard and the matt of hair which was just as red, falling about his ears. He clapped a thick, weather-beaten hand upon my shoulder, and one upon Orri's, but his son's eyes had lost their shine that day. I could see that he was overwhelmed, frightened simply because he did not know whether the destroyers gave reason for anxiety.

But we were young then. I had barely passed my

eighteenth birthday, and I suddenly felt as though we were poised on an indefinite, shapeless brink and the whole world was about to happen at once - a cacophonous collapse of control. That gives anyone reason to be scared. Of course, all I could do was watch as everything appeared to be pulled to pieces. I remember the wash of indefinable panic in which I was gripped by such a realisation as I stood on the mountainside; the new word to accompany it; the immense well of sorrow that had begun to open in the pit of my stomach.

And yet I remember little else of that day. I do not even know why we were in Tórshavn. I vaguely recall the smell, the taste; the texture of fish - but admittedly, as a fisherman, Magnus always embodied this smell, and he had little other-related business. I do not know if there was a clamour in the town or not. I hold simply a photograph in my mind, imprinted like a red-hot brand against the inside of my head.

I do, however, remember the blackout.

It was almost unbearable to be in the capital that spring night, one of the longest of my life. We were staying in the small, dank room of an old house fairly close to that dreaded harbour, Orri and I with our anxious faces pressed to the cold glass of the window. Magnus sat by the low glow of the oil lamp at the centre table. Darkness swelled around us like an enclosing hand, filling our ears, our eyes, our choked mouths. It is not easy to forget the silence of such a night. I remember the creases of Magnus's weatherbeaten face as he looked up from his book, and illuminated in the warm glow of the burning oil lamp it was graced by his broad, trademark smile.

'They're still there, boys, time to get some sleep.'

We looked again as the destroyers were swallowed up by the creeping darkness of night, and with a seemingly thunderous rustle Magnus put away his book. I reached out to give Orri's limp hand a comforting squeeze, for he looked exhausted and shaken to the bone, but at my touch he whipped back his hand. I drew breath to apologise - though exactly what for

I could not say. His face had become a mask of anxiety. As my apology went unspoken he offered me a weak smile in reparation, his eyes unable to rest on mine.

As we lay awake later that night in the velvet darkness, while Magnus snored contentedly in the second bed across the room, Orri kept himself a couple of inches away from me. He lay stiffly on his back, his arms stapled to his sides as though paralysed. I could see nothing, though I held my eyes wide open to stare at what I was sure lay in front of me – though began now to doubt – but I knew he was awake and that his eyes were open as boldly as my own, unable to let go of the night. For this was the night we first knew, without a doubt, that it was wartime.

I adjusted my leaden body occasionally, moved my arms and legs in want of a comfortable position as they numbed from my restlessness, and every time I inadvertently brushed against Orri's still, alert body he would flinch, draw away into an even greater depth of the blackout. Sometimes this distance seemed so great in the night's disregard for space that I was convinced I was alone.

When we were younger the requirement to share a bed had been an adventure: to us it was a fort constructed from bed posts, pillows and throws, or a fishing boat with a blanket sail atop a wooden sea. We would reel out lines and nets and carry out impersonations of Magnus until we were breathless with laughter and the man himself would call across the room for a bit of peace and quiet. Perhaps we had simply grown too old for games, but in recent years Orri seemed to mourn the loss of his own space whenever I came to inhabit it.

I wished now that we could regress into the comfort of a blanketed den, a safe haven unreachable by warships. Abandoned instead in a seeming oblivion, I could feel my body stiffening, taste the emptiness. But then Orri's shallow breathing would resume, and Magnus would give a loud snort from across the thick dark of the room, and I would take shape again. I drifted eventually into an uncomfortable sleep, the sort of unconsciousness that lies so close to the



waking state that it seems almost to be a feat of the imagination; not even that, for in my dreams I found myself in the same room, the same bed, the same company, still stiffly on my back with my head slipping off the hard pillow.

I slid out of bed with numb legs and drew the blackout curtain to one side. The blinding white light from the city's million lamps hit me as profoundly and with as much force as any destroyer would have done, so intensely that the sky was illuminated as though with pure, unspoiled daylight. The buildings themselves were of white stone, and the sea a bright grey, lying as still as a mill-pond, perfectly clear, devoid of anger, emotion or destroyers. Featureless, blank. I realised then that my eyes were not open, and anxiety welled within me for they felt glued shut, my eyelids as blackout curtains. I forced them open, with all my willpower prised them apart. I was met with darkness. I had not moved at all.