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The Helios Disaster

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I AM BORN of a father. I split his head. For an instant that is as long as life itself we face one another and look each other in the eye. You are my father, I tell him with my eyes. My father. The person in front of me, standing in the blood on the floor, is my father. His woollen socks suck it up greedily and turn red. The blood sinks into the worn wooden floor and I think, *his eyes are green like mine*.

How, at my birth, do I know that? That my eyes are green like the sea.

He looks at me. At my shining armour. He lifts his hand. Touches my cheek with it. And I lift my hand and close it around his. Lean against him. His arms, which embrace me. We cry together. Warm, salty tears and snot run down my face. I want nothing but to stand like this with my father and feel his warmth, listen to the beating of his heart. I have a father. I am my father's daughter. These words ring through me like bells in that instant.

Then he screams.

His scream tears everything apart. I will never again be close to him. Never again rest my head against his chest. We have met and must immediately part. He could do no more than give me life. The scream presses my lips to-

gether; they want to shout at him to stop. *You're scaring me*, grows within my mouth. My temples ache. All the love turns to rage in my chest.

So much screaming, I think, and I immediately want to plunge my lance into his heart to make it stop. I'm afraid. Just a child.

He doesn't stop screaming. He holds his head. Presses his strong hands to it as if to close what has opened.

*

I take off my armour and hide my lance in the kitchen bench. I am wearing my helmet when I go out into the world for the first time. I am twelve years old when I show up in the village in the north.

I step into the snow with bare feet. I don't get far. A naked girl with a golden helmet on her head. Moreover, there are many people who saw the ambulance that picked up my father after the neighbour couple came running to find out what had happened. They had heard his scream from far away. And the neighbours who saw me in the armour on the floor in my father's living room wanted to know. Had I been kept hidden? Who was I? A child whom no one had seen. Where were my parents?

It was chaos. What should I say?

'My name is Greta,' said the neighbour lady. 'Who are you?'

I didn't answer. My tongue suddenly felt large and shapeless, thick and in the way.

'You have to put something on.'

She took off her down coat and put it around me. She carefully but firmly took me by the elbow and led me to their house, which was on the same street as my father's. She led me like this, into the warm, as they apparently say, and into the kitchen, where she sat me down on a chair.

What do I do now? My thoughts were jumbled around and I longed for my father's eyes. Instead I got warm milk with honey and cinnamon, and clothes.

'I'll help you,' she said when she saw that I only stared at the clothes.

'Dear girl. Here are some underpants, there we go. First one foot, then the other. Good. Long johns. They're made of wool, so you won't freeze. It's cold up here right now, you know. It's over twenty below freezing. Then the undershirt. You can have these clothes. They're too small for me now.' She dressed me from head to toe. Pants and knitwear and everything. I also received a coat, and a hat and mittens. I thought of the armour in the kitchen bench and wanted to go there.

'Now you have to tell me who you are,' Greta said when I had drunk the milk and eaten up the reindeer-meat sandwich. *Reindeer meat*, I thought, storing the words in my memory. That salty and bloody taste.

'I want to go to my father,' I said.

'Dear child. Conrad doesn't have any children.'

'He has me,' I said, getting up from the chair.

Greta looked at me gravely.

'Has he been mean to you? Conrad is a bit different, after all.'

'No.'

Would a father be mean to his child? To his own child?

‘Has he kept you hidden?’

Greta was kind. I understood this, even if what I wanted most of all was to knock the chair I was sitting on to pieces and destroy the house after what she’d said about my father. *She doesn’t know any better*; the thought that came to me calmed me down and I realized two things: that no one would ever understand how I came to be in Conrad’s kitchen and that I would therefore be alone for the rest of my life.

Greta drove me to the social-services office in the city. She had made a call, and I had heard the words: ‘Girl. Conrad. I don’t know what to do. I can’t keep the girl here.’ And then this: ‘If I didn’t know better, I would believe that a miracle has happened.’ Miracle. That was the word that stuck, and I didn’t know where to put the word, so I looked at Greta to keep more words from coming out of her.

My father had acute schizophrenia and was sent, screaming, to the mental hospital in Skellefteå, where his story was disregarded and his headache was alleviated with medicine so strong that, in the end, he himself was sceptical that it had really happened. But I didn’t know that then, as I sat in Greta’s car looking at all the white. I still believed that I would live in the house with the dirty rag rugs and the unwashed windows. That Conrad would come back and that we would be father and daughter, as it had been decided in that instant when everything between us was still good.

Snow. Snow. I learned the word right away. Understood that it was important. It was the only thing I could see besides the road and Greta.

‘The reindeer are having a hard time this year. The Sami are driving them further and further down to find pasture, but the snow line is all the way down to Stockholm. And it’s only fall. Just think. So much snow and it’s only October.’

October, I thought. *Reindeer*. *Sami*, I thought, and I saw a flowing body of water pushing its way out of the landscape.

‘The river,’ said Greta. ‘Do you know what I’m talking about?’

I shook my head. The river. The river.

‘We’ll be in the city in an hour. They’re going to ask questions. Do you know what I mean?’

I looked out the window. The river rushed along as if it were playing. It hopped and twisted. I rested my forehead against the window and it was like it was singing, the river.

The helmet was beside me in the back seat. I stroked it with my hand, and the fact that it was there calmed me.

‘People are going to talk, you know. A naked girl in Conrad’s house.’

‘He is my father. I don’t know the rest,’ I said.

‘No,’ said Greta, and she concentrated on driving.

There was an ache within my chest, and I looked out across the snow that lay on the branches of the trees, on the fields and the meadows. *It is sadness*, I said to the snow. *That’s*

what is hurting and pushing out the tears. What will I do? I don't know anything about my future. Who am I? I asked the snow.

The city grew closer. Wooden houses, several storeys high. The people walking on the street looked like black birds against all the white. They flocked together and glided away from each other. *They know nothing*, I thought, and then: *Is this where I belong? Among them? We have nothing to do with one another.* It was clear as they rushed along. That we wouldn't become familiar with one another. I closed my eyes and remembered Conrad's eyes. Those calm eyes looking at me.

*

I was placed in a home. The family I was going to live with had always wanted a girl. They already had two boys as it was.

The social-services lady was called Birgit, and there wasn't much to her. We didn't say much to each other because she smoked the whole time. Cigarettes and smoke were all over the room with the telephone and the lingonberry almanac she was looking at.

'It's a difficult situation, but I'm sure we'll figure something out.'

Her accent was like Greta's, and that was something they had up here. Something in common. As she exhaled the cigarette smoke she said that the best option was probably Birgitta and Sven. Sweet people. They had always wanted to have a girl, and here she gave me an exhortative smile, as if

she demanded a smile in return, since she was putting in so much effort on my behalf.

I didn't smile. I didn't speak. I hadn't mentioned my father's name because I could not utter it in this ugly room with the picture and the desk and the lady.

I coughed from the smoke when she asked me if it sounded okay.

'Does that sound okay?' she said.

'Good people. Really normal and nice. Active in club life. Lots of sports. Those things are important when there are so few of us. Sticking together. You understand that, don't you?'

'I'd rather live with Greta,' I finally said.

But that wasn't true. I would go to my father. Get my armour and free him. Nothing else was possible, now that I wanted it so much.

'Greta doesn't want you, you see. But I have to know'—she coughed—'how you got here. Tell me. It will feel better as soon as you tell me.' She paused and took a drag on her cigarette, in and out. 'Even if it's horrible, it will feel better afterward.'

Everything went quiet. I looked out at the white outside the window. All the words she had said struck me. *So many words for nothing*, I thought.

A thought came to me: *The snow is beautiful*. All the white. I thought I could say it. As an experiment.

'The snow is beautiful.'

The social-services lady didn't say anything to that. Instead she said that she helped people who lived under very difficult circumstances.

‘Where is he?’ I said. ‘Where is my father?’

She took a little drag on her cigarette and thought for a long time, it looked like. She ran her index finger across the desk pad.

‘You have to have a name.’

She stood up and her skirt swung and twisted around her legs as she walked to the bookcase full of binders and catalogues, and she took one out, a binder with a red spine, and then she sat down and looked at me.

‘You look like an Anna,’ she said. ‘Anna Bergström. That sounds nice,’ she said, looking at me.

Her gaze seemed to get stuck, so I looked out the window again at all the snow that lay there outside like it was waiting for me. That’s how it felt. As if it were waiting for me.

I was placed in a home. I should be glad, said the social-services lady. I should be glad, Greta said later, in the waiting room.

‘You couldn’t have gotten a better family. A family is like a little flock, and they stick together and love each other,’ said Greta. ‘I’m going to give you a dictionary. Can you read?’

Read. Flock.

I knew I had to get home to my father. That was the only thing I knew. I would find that place and lead him home. I could tempt him with reindeer meat if he wouldn’t come on his own, I thought.

I was to wait there and they would come to get me. They had already been contacted. Even if they had probably