

Positively Medieval

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Grynid understood that Asbjorn Haugen's guidebook on Humans was outdated, but it was the only reference book she had. It had led her to believe there would be more pitchforks. She hadn't seen any on the flight from Norway to Ronald Reagan Washington International Airport, though, nor a hint of one at baggage claim. She saw Humans pushing luggage trolleys, drinking decorative coffees, and consoling their jet-lagged children. Not a pitchfork in sight. Humans, it seemed, were entirely modern and civilized.

Mother was wrong. A delightful thought.

Now it was up to Grynid to show Humans that Trolls were also modern and civilized. She took small, non-tromping steps through the U.S. Customs line. Instead of hefting, she plucked her book sack from the conveyor belt like a dandelion. She smiled with minimal tusk when she was mistakenly called an Ogre. Twice. Because of their quarantine, few Americans had ever met a real Troll. They still believed offensive medieval stereotypes set forth by Human authors. Grynid must make a good impression. Challenge their assumptions. She must be the model Troll.

Difficult, because these goggles made her want to tear a tree in half.

They perched ridiculously across her broad gray nose, covering most—but not all—of both eyes. Pop-ups flared in the corner of her vision. *Another loser in the Stocks! Join the Roast!* a cartoon pig invited. A grainy gif of a unicorn licking a mermaid's fins: *WET and HORNY fairy-tale babes in your area!!* A reminder that with an upgrade she could opt out of advertisements.

She upgraded.

Outside there were no carriages or carts. Grynid sniffed for the ocean to orient herself. Industrial smells muddled her sense of direction.

“Excuse me? Is there a map? I’m trying to get to—”

“Use the app.” The Human flicked a finger, tossing a link to Grynid’s goggles: GetTHare! maps, free download!

A pink rabbit bounced across the empty street, a question mark over its cartoon head. Grynid looked at the address on her college-acceptance envelope and blinked. The rabbit’s question mark popped into an exclamation point. “3700 O St NW! Follow me!”

“No, a map. Show me the route.”

The rabbit hopped. “Follow me!”

Grynid toggled through the app menu. There was no map/route view option. Her lips twisted. She would defer to Human culture and customs in many ways. She’d eat lobster. She’d live inside a concrete dormitory with *carpet*. She’d even create a profile for this tech, linking all of her personal data, just to integrate into Human society! But a Troll is her own navigator. She always knows where she is. A lost Troll is a dead Troll. Grynid would not blindly follow a preposterously hued bunny who might lead her anywhere. Mother would die laughing.

How was she supposed to get to law school?

Flustered, Grynid ducked into a damp alleyway. It was dark, narrow, and smelled of mildew: cozy. Like her home cave. She removed her goggles and pinched the bridge of her nose. She wasn’t lost. And she could not panic in public, it would scare the Humans. Worse, it would validate Mother.

Grynid tossed her sack to the ground with a heavy *whumph*. She rifled one-handed through her books: law, caselaw, rules of evidence. Strunk & White. Asbjorn Haugen’s *Humans: How to*

Avoid Them and What to Do if You Can't, 1st ed. Trollskog Press, 1590. An envelope brushed her fingertips. She slid her nail under the seal. A return ticket to Trollskog, dated for the solstice.

Mother's handwriting on the back: *For when you come to your senses.*

Her guts were loam, sandy and rough. She snorted and flared her nostrils at Mother's smug confidence. Grynid would not be crawling back home. Not before the solstice or after.

She couldn't. She didn't have a map.

Tires squealed and acrid burnt rubber wrinkled Grynid's nose. A yellow headlight flashed into her eyes. There was a yelp, a screech of brakes, and a scooter bounced off Grynid's hip. She rubbed at the sting. The bike sputtered on its side; its solar-pack sparked. A Human woman stared at Grynid with goggle-less eyes. The tech had knocked free in the crash; it rocked askew on the asphalt. The woman jumped to her feet.

"You hurt?" Unlike every other Human, who glanced away as soon as they saw her, this woman traced peat-dark eyes down Grynid's form. She held her breath. Feeling seen made her blush.

"No." She winced. "My hips are sturdy."

The woman raised a pencil-thin eyebrow. "Lucky for me."

"Don't you mean lucky for me?"

"Here's hoping." A smile quirked her features then fell to a frown. "Hey, you okay?"

"What? I..." Grynid hastily banished a stray tear. Mother despised tears. "I'm fine."

The Human held up her hands. "I won't tell anyone. Hide as long as you like." She turned to her bike.

"How'd you know I was..."

Engines revved near the alley entrance. Whoops and cheers bit into the night air; headlights bounced against the building.

“Hide!” The Human knocked her shoulder into Grynid’s still-smarting hip and pulled them both into shadow. Grynid pressed her back to the brick wall. Warm Human fingertips pressed Grynid’s lips. A Human shoulder nested into the crook of Grynid’s elbow, her head on Grynid’s pounding heart. Human hair tickled her bicep. Short hair, undercut at the nape. She smelled like cinnamon and woodsmoke.

The lights and sounds rushed down the street. The Human exhaled and slumped against Grynid.

“I see.” Grynid bent her head to whisper into the woman’s hair. “You’re hiding, too.”

The Human lifted her fingers. “Guilty. Those dudes’ve been after me for days.”

Ah. Overly persistent suitors. Grynid understood. “Some men can’t take a hint.”

The woman whisper-laughed and looked up. She didn’t move from the wall or the shadows, and Grynid felt her face heating like a hot spring. The guidebook hadn’t mentioned how warm their skin was to the touch.

“Never met a Troll before,” the woman said.

The burden of making a good impression doused her like ice water. “Don’t worry.” Grynid held out empty hands. “I promise I won’t eat you.”

The Human tilted her head. “Let’s at least exchange names before we rule anything out.”

Grynid extended a finger. “I’m Grynid. Law student.”

“I’m Lupe. Night courier.”

She blinked. Knight courier? Grynid had read all about knights!

“I’m freelance. Hence: no colors.”

Grynid's goggles highlighted Lupe's form. A text bubble blipped: *No Affiliation*.

"Freelance, yes. Knight Errant. A Hedge Knight!" Grynid's relief almost knocked her flat. She wasn't lost! She was with a knight!

Lupe left the wall and inspected her bike; toggling switches and tightening attachments. "I can get you anything you need, any time of night. That's my guarantee."

"Like... a map? No—not GetTHare!" She warding away Lupe's attempt to swipe the app toward her. "A real map. With terrain features."

Lupe frowned. "You lost?"

"A troll is never lost. Also... I don't trust that rabbit. It seems... sinister."

"Fair enough. I got maps. Laminated. Terrain features, elevation lines, the works."

Grynid's heartbeat was thunder. "I will pay anything." The American dollar was so devalued compared with the Trollskog Crown, she could afford the expense. Grynid kicked herself. Despising pecuniary reward was part of a knight's code. She hoped Lupe wasn't offended.

"I got 'em stashed at my place across the bridge. Would you... want to come with me?" Lupe tossed her hair to one side and rubbed her arm. Nervous? She wiped her goggle lenses and fitted them over her ears. "We could—holy-cheese-and-crackers. You're a blank slate."

Grynid stepped back, edging against her book sack. "A what?"

Lupe's eyes and mouth were both wide. "A blank slate. You have perfect cred. No reviews."

Grynid fiddled with the new tech. "I only set up my profile this morning. Is that good or bad?"

"It means you're powerful. Dangerous."

Grynid didn't like those adjectives.

A swarm of engines roared. Grynid and Lupe whipped their heads towards the head of the alley. The dudes searching for Lupe were no longer searching. They'd found her.

"Holy shirtballs!" Lupe frantically mashed her goggle controls. "I forgot when these things hard reboot they default to broadcasting live location!" Lupe pulled at the scooter handlebars. "Can you lift this? If they touch it, the program lets them rate me. They'll ruin my cred."

"Why?" Grynid lifted the bike with one hand and set it on the iron fire escape above her head.

"It's how the software works. I can't afford to upgrade. They cannot touch my bike."

Motorcycle tires spun down the alley. Four more bikes zigged in formation. The goggles outlined them in blue. *Courier Affiliation: Pentagon.*

They were also Knight Couriers?

"Run, Grynid." Lupe tugged at her elbow.

"Run?" From suitors? That was not the way to deal with men. "I could help you."

The lead Pentagon dude toed his kickstand down and stepped off his bike. His fellows did the same.

"You'll... help me?" Lupe's voice was flat.

"Of course." Stern, direct logic would get through to them. "I'll take care of them. This sort of thing is my specialty."

"Luuuuuuuppppee..." the lead man called. "Bring out your wheels!"

"Hey, Craig." Lupe stepped from the shadows. "How're things?"

"You're not running? That's a first."

Craig's posse grunted and laughed. "The rat's cornered."

“Actually, you germy buttwives.” Lupe bounced with excitement. “*You’re* cornered. You want me? You gotta go through *her*!”

Grynid lifted her sack of law books onto her shoulder. She tromped into the light. The Pentagon dudes cursed and shuffled.

“That’s right! I’m not alone!” Lupe crossed her arms. “Grynid? They’re all yours.”

Grynid dropped her sack and straightened. Her tusks flashed in the headlights. She towered over the dudes, and spoke.

“Gentlemen, the lady does not reciprocate your affections and has no desire to continue courtship. Furthermore, trying to force her to accept *grenvalid* highlights a lack of character.”

The men stood motionless.

Lupe punched her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“I’m... explaining your position. What were you expecting me to do?”

Lupe waved at the book sack. “Club them! Dine on their flesh! Throw ’em in a stewpot!”

“I’m a Troll, not an animal!”

Craig leaned forward. “So... you’re not going to do any of those things?”

Grynid huffed. “Violence is the refuge of the incompetent—hey!”

Craig whistled and the gang filed past Grynid with impunity. “It’s up there!”

“You said you’d help me!” Lupe climbed a trash bin and leapt to the fire escape.

“I am! With logic and reason! Sir? Sir! Lupe has rebuffed your affections!”

“I’m not after her affections, Tolkien-spawn!”

The slur hit her like a slap.

“Boost me up, boys. Just need one touch!” Atop his crony’s shoulders, Craig stretched his hand. Lupe lifted the scooter onto its back tire, almost out of reach. The dude’s finger touched

the rim. “Gotcha!” He dropped to the ground and touched his goggles. Five yellow stars appeared over his head. He blinked, and one by one the stars turned hollow. With a twitch of his jaw, the stars flew at Lupe.

Guadalupe DeSantos: Courier. Zero stars. Thank you for your review.

More dudes jumped to the fire escape. Lupe stomped on fingers poking through the grate. “Listen, Grynid.” The Human woman scrambled at her bike, pulling wires and pressing buttons. She mule-kicked the next dude, but not before his palm slapped her handlebars. Five more hollow stars flew to Lupe. “Still want a map?”

“Yes?”

“Carry my scooter and I’ll get you a map.”

A third dude reached for her bike.

“In or out?”

Grynid heard Mother’s judgment: *Two hours in America and you’re running wild after some pretty face? So much for being serious about your studies!*

This was different though.

Lupe was a knight, and she had a map.

Craig had called her Tolkien-spawn.

“In.”

“Get ready.”

The dudes pulled down a rusty ladder and swarmed toward the bike like tree ants. Lupe pointed the solar-pack of her bike at their faces. “Eat this mother—wait, Grynid? Sunlight turns Trolls to stone?”

“No. That’s a myth, popularized by *certain* Human writers. The truth is—”

“Close your eyes.”

A puff of ozone; hot air dried Grynid’s lips when the energy beam burst from the solar-pack. Veins of red and yellow spiderwebbed the insides of her eyelids. The dudes fell, clutching their overloaded goggles.

“Get my bike!” Lupe yelled from the roof of the building. She was already running.

Grynid gripped her book sack and the scooter’s handlebars in her left hand and slung them over her shoulder.

Two quick pulls put her on the roof. She jogged after the knight.

##

“Do you often fight with fellow knights?”

“Other night couriers? That’s *all* we do.”

“Why were they giving you zero stars?”

“Today’s the thirty-first.” Lupe balked when Grynid shrugged. “Vassal & Lorde contract gets renewed on the first of the month. It goes to whichever courier has the highest rating at midnight on the thirty-first. As of right now, that’s me.”

“It’s a lucrative contract?”

“Hecka lucrative. If I do well, a five-star review from V&L will set me up for years. I’ve been running nonstop to get my ratings up. Craig and his goons can’t beat me so they’re trying to trash my ratings. Just gotta keep them away from my bike until midnight.”

“Why don’t they just work harder to beat you fairly?”

“No one is faster than me.” Her face pinched. “I’ve had lots of practice running.”

The scooter bounced on Grynid’s shoulder; its empty solar-pack sparked a weak death rattle. She was very resourceful, this knight. Half a dozen rival knights, and she bested them. She

harnessed the power of the sun and crippled the monstrous hoard at the last moment—truly something from a ballad! Grynid’s chest was light, she ran on her toes. *So naïve*, Mother’s voice scoffed. *Daydreaming like a pebblekin*.

She cleared her throat. “Almost to the maps?”

“Soon.” Lupe climbed a three-rung ladder to another roof. “Help me look, will ya? Purple suitcase with wheels.”

Grynid set down the bike and her sack and caught her breath while Lupe tossed through cardboard boxes. There was little starlight to see by.

“Why’d you leave Trollskog?” Lupe said from the other side of the roof. “Aren’t Trolls, like, isolationists?”

“True,” Grynid said. When the Council of Legendary Creatures voted to reveal themselves to the Humans and fix climate change, the Trolls had been the only group to oppose. The Fae and Sprites were enthusiastic, of course—they loved to show off. But even when the Yokai and Baba Yaga and Bigfoot himself voted yes, still the Trolls said nay. “Historically, our peoples do not get along. Too many pitchforks.” And the representation in Human literature left much to be desired.

“Trolls to stone is a myth, huh?”

“Somewhat.” It was a nuanced, spiritual issue. “If a Troll lives a great life, they often return to the earth in a big way, creating stone landmarks that they may always be remembered.”

Lupe paused. “I wish I could go to Trollskog. Or anywhere else, really. But no one wants an American immigrant. Where’s that suitcase? I stashed it here. If someone stole it, we’ll be heading to the poop bank, and honestly I already pooped this morning. I don’t know if I have any more in me.”

Grynid had no time to process each increasingly ridiculous statement.

“Did you say *poop* bank?”

“No poop banks in Trollskog?” Lupe shrugged. “Folks here still live by quarantine rules, even though there hasn’t been an outbreak in a decade. They stay inside and pay couriers to deliver things, so they don’t risk infection. Since *we* live outside, we got, like, awesome bugs in our gut. Perfect for fecal transplants. Destroys c.diff. Poop banks saved the country, knocked out the SuperBug.”

“The wealthy keep you outside, then harvest your feces to save their own lives?” That was barbaric. It was feudalism. “You’re a serf,” she realized.

“Surf? Not my thing. Aha!” Lupe lifted a maroon suitcase. “Found it.”

“The maps?”

“The scrap. You want a map? Map is in my stash. Stash is across the bridge. Need the bike to get across the bridge, and we need solar to make the bike go. We’re going to buy some solar.”

A cold heaviness trickled to her belly. This was becoming complicated.

I told you so, sang Mother’s voice.

Lupe waved. “Let’s go to Target.”

##

Welcome to Target! Expect More, Pay Less! Store currently under renovation. Order online!

Grynid blinked the ad away and faced a featureless, plastic Human. Dozens littered the second floor of the Target, in various poses and states of undress. A graveyard.

Lupe’s “guy” had agreed to meet them on the second floor of the building with a red circle out front. That was what passed for landmarks in America. He had yet to arrive. The flickering fluorescent light bulbs did nothing for Grynid’s apprehension.

The goggles chimed: person approaching. “Back here!” Lupe called. She leaned towards Grynid. “Don’t make a big deal, but this guy is a burnout. Used to be freelance, like me. Bit of bad business two years ago, get it?”

“A burnout?” The goggles outlined Lupe’s guy in striped red and gray.

“Bring it to the scale,” the guy called. Lupe pulled the purple suitcase down the aisle.

“Burnout is destroyed credit. But it takes three neighborhood leaders working together to burn someone’s cred, so it’s super rare. But when they do? Worse than zero stars. Supernova. No one will work with a burnout.”

Except Lupe, Grynid noticed. Her unease sharpened.

“Wait here.”

Grynid stood by empty shelves declaring *Dollar Deals!* Lupe chattered at her guy. The guy grunted; hefted the suitcase. They haggled. Grynid sat on her sack of books and rolled the bike back and forth, actively ignoring Mother’s laughter in her head. No. Lupe was a knight. Knights were trustworthy. She wasn’t lost.

A pop-up obscured her vision. Would she like to rate Bobby Rowe: Scavenger? It was a push notification, as opposed to Lupe’s rating system that required you to come in physical contact. Grynid scrolled through his profile. Every review was negative. Grynid shuffled her bare feet.

“How about we trade for solar?” Lupe needled. “Cut out the middleman.”

“I’ll give you cash, same as always.”

“Come on! I’m giving you good stuff!”

“Where are you getting this stuff anyway?”

Lupe shrugged and said nothing. Grynid felt the hairs on her ears rise. Strange. It was the first time in two hours the Human was at a loss for words. Knights were always supposed to speak the truth. Never deceive.

The guy rolled his eyes. “You want solar? Give me five stars, right here and now. Too chicken? You get cash.” He waved a green stack of dollars under her nose.

Lupe stuffed the wad of bills in her fanny pack and stalked away. “Fine.”

Grynid frowned. “I thought we were getting solar.”

“Someone will be selling it this time of night.” She tapped the air and blinked through her goggles, searching for such an establishment. “Grab the scooter.”

Grynid looked at the guy and the purple suitcase. Her stomach churned. “What were you selling?”

“Scrap.” Lupe zipped up her jacket. “Metal.”

“Lupe, you said we were getting solar.” She propped the bike on her left shoulder, her bag of books on the other.

Lupe sighed. “I can’t rate a burnout, not tonight. It would drop my credit. Don’t worry, next stop is solar, then your map.”

Grynid glared at Lupe’s back. I must be a model Troll, she reminded herself. No raging, no rudeness. I must politely resolve this situation. She blinked and twitched her nose. Five enormous stars appeared above her head. A flick of the wrist sent them to Bobby Rowe: Scavenger.

The red/gray line around him was replaced by a thick outline of gold. He glittered like a dragon’s living room.

Lupe gasped. “Did you just—”

“A knight gives succor to the weak and defenseless,” Grynid said. “Trolls can be chivalric too. Despite the stories, we are not Human-cooking oafs—”

Bobby Rowe dropped the purple suitcase. The zipper burst.

Bullets flooded out.

Grynid whirled on Lupe. “You told me it was scrap!”

“It *is* scrap!” Lupe screeched back.

“It’s arms dealing!”

Bobby Rowe sank to his knees. “You’ve... you’re a clean slate. I’ve got... I’ve got perfect cred!”

Grynid dropped the scooter. “I want nothing to do with this. You are not a knight.”

“Hey! My bike!” Lupe jumped on a shelf to bring her to Troll-eye level. She grabbed Grynid’s collar with a tiny fist. “Who ever said I was a knight? What’s your problem?”

Grynid would not escalate. She was a Troll. She was not a criminal. Or a barbarian. She would be civil but firm. “I do not approve of law breaking. You and I will part company. You’re on your own.”

Lupe froze as if slapped.

Grynid turned and tripped over Bobby Rowe, who was brandishing a pair of solar cells at her. “Take ‘em, they’re yours!” he cried. Grynid wobbled for balance. She flung an arm out to catch herself and grabbed the first thing she touched. The mannequin toppled; Grynid toppled. Her goggles flashed an alarm.

Lupe grabbed a mannequin arm and poked it at Grynid’s torso. “Don’t step on my bike!” she screamed. She pounced, and Grynid caught her in her arms. Her back hit a shelf. It fell into the shelf behind, and the shelf behind that. The alarm on the goggles grew brighter.

Her toe caught on the bike. She and Lupe tripped, spun, then bounced on the unmoving escalator and rolled downhill.

Grynid splayed on her back in the parking garage. Lupe's leg draped across her waist, her head on her shoulder.

"Ow..." they said together.

The goggles flashed. *Property Destruction. FINE. FINE.* It was not fine. Nothing was fine.

Lupe sat on her heels and rubbed her elbow. "You want to *part company*? You have no idea how to survive! You won't make it a week!"

"I shouldn't have followed you!" Grynid rolled to her feet. "I would've been better off with the rabbit!"

Lupe narrowed her eyes. Grynid bared her tusks. They both growled.

The scooter rolled down the escalator. Grynid's sack of books perched atop the seat, with two fresh solar-packs nestled inside. Bobby Rowe whistled. "Hey, Troll. I'm grateful as hell, but I gotta split before they get here."

"Before who gets here?"

Bobby blinked rapidly. "Everyone." He disappeared.

"No, no, no." Lupe lunged for Grynid's goggles. "Seriously? You're a clean slate, and you have your location set to public?"

"So?"

"You rated Bobby and tagged your location. Now everyone knows where you are. They'll swarm you and hold you hostage until you give them five stars. You *have* to customize your settings. Have you been living under a rock?"

"In a rock, actually."

“There. It’s disabled.”

Grynid replaced her goggles. *FINE. FINE*, they flashed. With GPS off the rabbit wouldn’t pop up. “How am I supposed to get around now?”

Lupe glared. “I *said* I’d get you a map.” She eyed the solar-packs in Grynid’s sack. “Put those on my bike so we can escape them.”

“You just want to protect your precious credit. All you do is run away!”

“And all you want is a map!”

Grynid glared. Lupe glared. Scooter tires screeched in the distance. With her keen night-vision Grynid saw a massive five-sided fortress in the distance: a castle! A storm of bikes spilled from its gates.

A mob. Coming for her.

Torches. Pitchforks.

Lupe stubbornly held out her hand. Grynid tossed her the solar-packs. She clipped them in. The bike sparked to life.

“Hold on,” Lupe said. “I drive fast.”

Grynid rested two fingers on the Human’s hips. Lupe slammed her foot on the pedal.

Nothing happened.

Grynid flushed platinum. “I’m too heavy.”

“You’re perfect. I’ve carried industrial refrigerators on this thing, it’s not you. It’s... Oh.” Her voice flattened. “We have a fine.”

The goggle flashing intensified. Distant scooters became less distant.

“We busted up those shelves. Property damage.”

“What do we do?” Grynid asked.

“Pay our debt to society. Money to the Pentagon authorities, or time in the stocks. The Pentagon offices aren’t open until morning.”

“The stocks?”

“We owe thirty minutes. We can do it while driving.”

Grynid’s shoulders hunched with each engine rev. “Yes. Let’s choose that.”

“Ever been in the stocks?”

“No?” It had to be better than the mob.

Lupe clicked ‘Stocks.’ The *Fine* alarm calmed and the scooter lurched forward. Lupe slammed on the pedal as a mob of blue-outlined scooters roared into view. The bike flew out of the garage; wind whipped Lupe’s hair against Grynid’s neck.

“We’re near the border. Once we cross into Mall territory the dudes behind us will stop chasing!”

You’ve been naughty! A cartoon pig wagged a finger in the corner of the goggles. Absurd. Pigs had hooves. *Enjoy your time in the stocks!*

“Is this the fine?” Grynid asked.

“Keep your goggles on, no matter what!” Lupe shouted over her shoulder. “Turn them off, the scooter stops. Mute them, the scooter stops. You must listen.”

“To what?”

“To every bored teenager and frustrated quarantine rat throwing insults and hatred your way.”

Words? Only words? Branches and boulders might bruise my shoulders, as Mother would say. “Just thirty minutes?”

“Yeah.” Lupe clipped her words. “Just thirty minutes.”

The three-fingered pig pulled aside a curtain. Lupe gunned the scooter forward.

##

They zipped under a dark overpass and emerged on an empty forested road. Oaks and maples leaned toward them, heavy with their summer coats. Fir and spruce pointed toward the white moon. Grynid could barely see them through the wall of text flooding her goggles.

@cdiffsbatch: troll so fat look like it ate a whole village

@funkienloud: everyone hates you

@iwantfairytail: kill yourself kill yourself kill yourself

Someone posted a link to a website. Instructions on how she might kill herself.

“This is the stocks?” she asked.

“Yeah. Hey, I have to turn mine to Audio since I’m driving.”

“I’ll do the same.” She wanted to be able to see if Pentagoners or dudes of any variety were approaching. “Perhaps they will drown each other out.”

“They won’t.” Lupe’s words came through a clenched jaw.

“I’ve taken dumps better looking than you.”

“you are the reason I don’t go outside”

Grynid felt Lupe’s shoulders tense. “It’s not true,” Grynid muttered. “They’re just words. Clearly you’re not unattractive, by Human standards.” Or Troll standards, for that matter.

“If we talk too much they’ll shut off the bike. Be quiet and listen.”

Grynid tried to let her mind wander. Let the Humans hurl their insults. Trollphobic insults. Sexually violent insults. Increasingly sexual and increasingly violent insults. She checked the timer. They were only four minutes into their punishment.

A picture appeared to accompany the audio. It hit Grynid like an overripe tomato.

“look what I found! Ogre baby and Ogre mommy!”

“I just threw up in my mouth”

“kill me. I can’t unsee that.”

Where did they find her baby pictures? Oh that’s right. She had to link her TuskBook account when she created her profile

“you see her mom’s face???? here’s my baby...anybody want to trade?”

Doctored photos flashed across her vision. They circled and zoomed in on her baby fat. They wrote obscene words across her nappies. No need to change Mother’s expression, though. She always did look disappointed.

More photos appeared. Mother picking her teeth during Grynid’s Acornclass graduation. Mother looking embarrassed at the Fire Circle Debate championship. A particularly unflattering picture of Grynid’s debut into adult society. Mother was wincing there, too.

“Her own mama thinks she’s trash!”

Laughter erupted. Did they have to broadcast the laughter? Grynid looked over Lupe’s hunched shoulder.

“see the immigrant’s pics? ALWAYS ALONE AND ALWAYS RUNNING”

“Hey guys, wait up! Wait up!”

“unwanted little sister”

Grynid frowned at the pictures flashing in the corners of her vision. Lupe was running in every single one. She’d been running the entire night.

“OMG she’s applied to join the P-Gon couriers SEVEN TIMES!”

Lupe flicked a switch. The scooter sped up.

“And the Zoo couriers!”

“EVEN DUPONT REJECTED HER!”

“Spell desperate: L-U-P-E”

Lupe hunkered over the handlebars. “Almost to the bridge. That’s Mall territory.”

Grynid looked behind—no one was following. Lupe was speeding as if she could outrun the comments.

The trees on the sides of the road thinned. Lupe zoomed the bike onto a wide bridge. Wind whipped tears from under Grynid’s goggles. A water feature, a landmark, and Grynid could not appreciate it.

“Go back to Norway, fugly monster!”

“Eat the Mexican for a snack on your way!”

She felt sick.

“Stop the bike,” Grynid said. They were over the bridge. Lupe tapped the brakes.

Stone called to her. Grynid stumbled forward, climbing white stairs. She crawled into a cave built of columns and carvings. Lupe followed. The voices followed. She curled at the foot of a marble statue.

Twenty minutes left in the stocks.

Lupe clutched her own elbow and slumped against the far wall. She rolled into herself as if trying to turn to stone. Grynid knew that look. Lupe was lost. They both were.

Grynid reached out.

Troll and Human hands found each other in the dark. They sat shoulder to shoulder, hearing each other’s insults, feeling each other’s pain. The goggles streamed evidence after evidence they were losers. Failures. Forever alone. Forever disappointing.

Raindrops fell on stone. Grynid blinked through tears. The comments had stopped. The words and insults running through her mind were echoes. It was over.

They took off their goggles and listened to the rain. Lupe shifted. Grynid kept hold of her hand.

“How did they know?” she whispered into the silence.

“Crowdsourced bullying.” Lupe sniffed. “They pinpoint your insecurities, then hammer away at them.”

The Human took back her hand and wiped at her eyes. Grynid sat up.

“Hey,” said Lupe. “Our debt to society is paid.”

“Why would that be payment?”

Lupe shrugged. “People need an outlet. They do it to us, the consenting, and not to people who don’t deserve it. It’s a good system.”

“It’s a lemming-scat system. Lupe? Why are you always running?”

Lupe turned away and adjusted her jacket. “People can’t hurt you if they can’t catch you.”

Grynid looked around the massive cave. A man of marble sat on a throne with words carved above him. IN THIS TEMPLE AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE...

“Who is Abraham Lincoln?”

Lupe glanced upward. “Old president?”

A smile tugged at Grynid’s tusks. “I know little about American Trolls. It is good you Humans honor him so.”

“I don’t think he’s a Troll.”

“Half-troll. Troll-Human mix. It is the same.”

“I think it’s just a statue.”

“Please, it speaks well of your land.”

Lupe shrugged and smiled. Grynid smiled back. She didn't hide her tusks. Lupe didn't seem to mind.

"Lupe... I'm lost," Grynid admitted.

"That's your mom talking." Lupe put her fists on her hips. "You, Troll lady, are kicking butt."

Grynid blushed.

"Not literally, of course. You're very prim."

"Thank you."

Lupe tossed the hair out of her eyes. "Listen, those were shells. Expended rounds. Not bullets. A few miles south there's an old military base. They got piles of shells all over. I collected them for years. When I moved up here, I stashed them all over the city. Little bits of emergency funds I can always count on. Nothing illegal."

"Military base?" Grynid said in a small voice.

"That's where I got your maps too. Military types have a kink for navigating without tech. Grease pencils and laminated topographical maps. I found them all over the woods."

Some Humans appreciated traditional land navigation? Grynid had the sudden urge to strip a tree of bark and share it with Lupe.

"I'm sorry for accusing you," she said.

"Sorry I'm not a real knight."

Grynid scratched at her ear. She'd been so worried Humans would have the wrong impression of Trolls. She hadn't considered the need to temper her expectations of Humans.

Lupe waved her towards the stairs, and the scooter parked below. "Ready to get your map?"

Grynid took a final look at Lincoln. She'd chosen America for a reason. A half-Troll became president. Perhaps even she could succeed.

“Ready.”

##

“Here it is. Home sweet home.”

A red awning covering the entryway read, “The Prime Rib.” The “i” was dotted with a star.

“Welcome to the steakhouse.” Lupe nosed the door open with her front bike tire.

Inside, dark-paneled walls boasted intricate wainscoting. Button-tufted leather benches and chairs lay in piles. A glass-lidded grand piano tilted on a broken leg.

“This is a restaurant?”

“Was. Can you imagine? People coming from all over to eat, right next to each other? Food made in large batches by dozens of different germy cooks in a huge filthy kitchen? We were asking for an epidemic.”

A ladder in the back led to the roof. They climbed in comfortable silence.

“Turn on your goggles. You’ll see why this is the perfect location.”

Bright-colored lines carved the rooftop into sections like a pie. Blue to the south, yellow-red and green to the north. Grayish-silver to the west. Borders of the different fiefdoms meeting at the steakhouse roof’s center.

“Anytime I’m in trouble, I jump a few feet and I’m in a whole new world.” Lupe pointed to each slice of territory. “That’s the Mall, Pentagon, Dupont, and the Zoo. West is the Hoyas.”

It was the perfect location if one planned to spend their entire life running and hiding. Grynid had an urge to again take Lupe’s hand.

“Twenty minutes to midnight. The V&L contract is as good as mine. Tonight, we both win.”

Lupe threw back an olive-green tarp and popped the clasps on a black plastic trunk.

Maps spilled out. Handheld types. With—

“Elevation lines. Terrain features.” Grynid’s knees wobbled.

“See, there’s the Potomac, that’s—”

“The river we crossed.” Grynid oriented the map. Everything was clear. Even the building layout followed the terrain to some extent. She could see!

A voice from street level cut through the night. “Come on down, Lupe!”

The color in Lupe’s face drained. Grynid grabbed her goggles. “My live location is still off!”

“Mine, too!” Lupe’s eyes popped wide. “The solar-packs! Bobby Rowe must’ve given everyone the tracking info, to get them off his back. Grab the bike. We’ll jump into Dupont.”

“Found ya!” A voice from Dupont territory.

Lupe turned left. “Fine, the Zoo.”

A voice from the Zoo. Voices from the Mall. Shuffling and scraping: they were climbing the walls.

Lupe bounced on the balls of her feet. “We’ll go to Hoyas’ territory. Even though they’re insufferable.” She tugged at Grynid’s arm.

“Lupe. Do we have to run?”

“They’re after *you*, Grynid. They want your cred. They will never stop harassing you. You won’t have a chance to kick butt in law school!”

Grynid’s tusk twitched. Lupe wanted to protect her. Prevent the failure Grynid feared.

She believed in her.

Hands crested the roof. A torso. Legs.

“Go, Lupe. Twenty minutes to midnight, save your contract. I’m tired of running.” Grynid hefted her bag of books. She was Grynid of Trollskog. She wouldn’t fall to a bunch of dudes. “I have logic and reason on my side. I will take a stand.”

Three other bodies summited and collected in the shadows. Grynid squared herself. She was a debate champion. She’d scored a 176 on the LSAT. She’d been accepted to one of the finest law schools in the world! She would not fail today, her first day away from home. She would teach them to respect the mind of a Troll.

A hand slipped inside hers. It shook.

“You’re not running?”

“Knights don’t run, right?” Lupe managed a smile.

Large Humans stepped into the light. The goggles highlighted them in various colors: leaders of separate courier factions. Their ratings were through the roof. Almost as high as Lupe’s.

“Gentlemen, I look forward to a civilized discussion of your concerns,” Grynid announced.

“You want her cred, you’ll have to come through me!” Lupe called out. “And when you get through me, you’ll have to deal with her!”

The Dupont Human snorted. “We’re not after your pet, Lupe. We’re here for you.”

“Me?” Lupe said.

“*Pet?*” Grynid said. “Wait, her?”

Lupe looked at the faction leaders. They each held an inverted tripod, as long as they were tall. One by one they attached a device to one of the prongs. An icon flared on each of them: a matchstick. A torch.

This was a burnout.

“Waitwaitwaitwaitwait!” Lupe waved her hands.

“You cheat!” cried the Human from the Zoo territory. “You’re too good for a freelancer!”

“I never cheat!” Lupe’s hands clenched in fists.

“Where’d you get all that solar?” Dupont taunted.

“THE SUN!”

Grynid cleared her throat. “The solar-packs were obtained legally.” She scanned them again. They were not law enforcement. They had no mandate to exact justice in this or any jurisdiction.

Craig, the Pentagon leader, spoke from behind. “You average an errand time of seven minutes. Our best guys, tricked out scooters, can’t break nine.”

“Because you keep to your districts! I can cross borders!”

“We don’t know how you’re doing it, but we know you’re cheating.”

“I’m not cheating! I’m just better!”

Of the forty-seven books in Grynid’s sack, more than half were devoted to the legal principles that govern the proof of fact. “I-don’t-know-how-you’re-so-good” was not one of them. “You have no evidence?”

The Mall leader jerked a thumb at Grynid. “Shut your rancid mammoth up.”

“*Rancid?*” Lupe said. “Are you blind? Can you not see her incredibly sturdy hips? She’s, like, objectively by any standard, smoking hot.”

“The Ogre’s a pacifist,” Craig said. “Don’t worry on her.”

The courier leaders relaxed and chuckled. They linked their burnout apps together, creating a web around Lupe. Then they clicked the tech on the tripods.

Pitchforks. They looked like pitchforks.

Grynid looked at the array of different colors. Heraldry from separate fiefdoms? A feudalist society complete with castles? Public humiliation as a punishment? For Grendel's sake, there was even a plague in this country!

Lupe closed her eyes and stood tall like a knight before battle. She didn't run.

Grynid snorted and flared her nostrils. This was unjust. They were angry because Lupe was—legally—better than they were. They were going to burn her?

At the steakhouse?

Grynid rubbed her tusk against her cheek. These villains were no different from the medieval mobs in Asbjorn Haugard's book. Lupe, standing brave, was no different from the medieval knights.

Screw it. Time for Grynid to be a medieval Troll.

“What the—!”

She swung her sack of law books in a perfect arc, slamming Craig and his tripod to the ground. Her second swing knocked Mall and Dupont into the Zoo Human. She swiped the tripods in her meaty palm, threw them in her jaw and chomped them in half. The Humans stared.

Grynid roared. It reverberated throughout the boroughs. She roared at this mob, at the Ogre-slurs, at Tolkien and the pink rabbit and her faithless *Mother* who never believed in her. She roared from the pit of her Troll belly.

With much limping, whining, and the acrid smell of urine, the witch-hunters vacated the roof. With each touch of the masticated tripods, pop-ups flared on Grynid's goggles. *Would you like to rate....*

“You all get zero stars!” Grynid swiped her claw at the air. Empty rows of stars flowed through the night. The Humans below cried out as if in physical pain. Grynid snorted past her tusks. She took two deep breaths.

Lupe stared with wide, frozen eyes.

Grynid pulled two law books out of the sack. “Technically, I did use logic and reason to defeat them.”

Lupe climbed atop a box, closing the distance between them. Filling it with her warmth. Cinnamon. Woodsmoke. They stood on the roof, straddling every barrier and border, listening to night wind and the sound of the Potomac.

“You just saved my life,” Lupe said. “Well, my cred.”

“You stayed. To defend me. No one’s ever stood up for me before.”

Lupe flickered a frown. “You’re really cool, Grynid. Like, above-average awesome. You’re worth standing up for. Still. They were after me, not you. And you stayed.”

Grynid shrugged, tried to swallow, found she couldn’t look away from that absurdly beautiful tuskless mouth. “You got me a map.”

Lupe reached out. Troll and Human hands found each other on the roof, as they had in Abraham Lincoln’s cave. Cinnamon and woodsmoke and a warm hand in hers.

“Can I...?” Lupe timidly bit her lip, setting Grynid aflame.

“Oh, yes.”

Grynid bent her neck, Lupe stretched on her tiptoes and two worlds built a bridge with a kiss. With a kiss, all else melted: time, the pink rabbit, Mother’s voice. She was not lost. Not lost at all.

The goggles chimed midnight, anchoring them to reality. Lupe's outline blinked out, then flashed silver.

"Lupe." Grynid looked her over. "You won the contract! Vassal & Lorde!"

"Huh." Lupe turned her hand, examining her new colors. "Somehow it's only the second-best thing that's happened tonight."

Grynid felt her face flush pewter.

"You have your map." Lupe tucked her hair behind one ear. "Where will you go?"

"O Street. Georgetown Law."

"Wow, Georgetown? Impressive." She nodded her chin at her scooter. "Need a ride?"

"Escorted by a knight?" Grynid asked. "How could I refuse?"

They climbed down the ladder. Lupe switched out Bobby Rowe's solar-packs with a fresh pair from her stash. Grynid felt a bold impulse. Mother did not approve of impulses. Grynid no longer cared.

"Lupe." She cleared her throat. "So as to be clear. You are also, uh, smoking hot. Objectively. By any standard. And I really like you."

Lupe paused, goggles part-way to her eyes.

"I'm very focused on academics. But, when I pass the bar, join a firm—perhaps make partner—if you are still interested, I would not be opposed to receiving romantic overtures. Perhaps even a *vakkerkart*."

Lupe held out her hand to Grynid. "Perfect. That'll give me time to figure out what a *vakkerkart* is. Until then we can just, like, kiss a lot, right?"

"Absolutely. Yes. A lot."

The bike started. Grynid held her map, her sack of books, and Lupe's waist. The sun rose behind them.