

Sendlingur og Sandlóa

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Sendlingur og Sandlóa

by [pyrrhocorax \(mniotilta\)](#)

Summary

During an average summer in modern day, the Nordics meet up in the countryside for a long vacation to relax together. However, with hundreds of years of history between them, old memories get dredged up, both bad and good.

Sendlingur og Sandlóa is a story about perspective, of loss and longing, the temperamental nature of both life and human relationships, and family.

(Aromantic asexual Iceland, queerplatonic SuNor and EstFin, romantic DenNor and SuFin. Centered around DenNorIce as a family unit but includes other relationships as well. And honestly, even though this is my intent, you can freely interpret the relationships however you see fit and I actively encourage you to do so if you'd like.)

Notes

Jóhannes "Jói" Hrafnsson is my name for Iceland
Henrik Pedersen is my name for Denmark
Halvard "Halle" Sørensen is my name for Norway

Jói and Halle are the pet forms of their respective names, in the same way that you might call somebody named Alexander "Alex" instead of their full name. In Iceland in particular, it's fairly common to call people by these pet forms more often rather than their full names.

Midpoint

Jóhannes' headphones remain clamped on his ears the entire journey.

Early in the morning on a day where fog clings lowly to the ground, Jóhannes leans against Halvard's car, sunglasses perched on his face, as he taps his foot to a beat that only he can hear. He had flown in from Iceland last night in preparation for the annual trip to Berwald's cabin to celebrate the longest day of the year. He wasn't looking forward to the party, if he had to be honest. After a number of years the ritual had lost its charm, and he would have stayed in Reykjavik had he not had this unshakable feeling that he needed to come. For some reason, deep within his soul, Jóhannes felt the world needed him here, now, hundreds of miles from his home.

(Maybe it wasn't the world that needed him here. Maybe he needed to be here for himself.)

(But is there really a difference?)

Jóhannes stops tapping his foot as Henrik exits Halvard's house, smiling wildly and nearly hopping over to him. Really, it would have been easier for Henrik to simply drive himself over to Sweden by himself. Jóhannes had frowned that he had not one, but *two* people waiting for him at the airport gates. The first words that came out of Jóhannes' mouth were harsh, questioning, genuinely confused as to why Henrik would go out of his way to meet him in Norway. Henrik just laughed, ruffled Jóhannes' hair, and exclaimed “glad to see you, too!” before pulling the three of them together into a hug.

Jóhannes is so distracted by Henrik's presence (as the Dane is double checking to make sure everything they need is loaded in the car) that he doesn't realize his brother is outside until Halvard is practically right next to him, eyes pointed at the ground and breath silent. Halvard doesn't move as Jóhannes jolts in surprise, but neither of them say anything. They barely look at each other.

“Ready?” Henrik asks to two people who neither reply or react to his question.

He smiles for all three of them.

Halvard drives, Henrik navigates (which is a useless position given Halvard knows the way to Berwald's by memory), Jóhannes sits behind them, luggage and his puffin's birdcage taking up the rest of the space. The fog lurches across the road in front of them, heavy and unnaturally thick. Later, there's light rain. The world is gray, like the color of Jóhannes' ashy hair.

The radio isn't on, no music is being played, but Henrik is singing to himself. Some of the songs he sings are ones that Jóhannes knows—he even has some of them on his phone—others are brand new. But Jóhannes is much more distracted by his brother—who normally does not speak much with his voice—who is singing too. Their timing isn't perfect, their harmonies not always matching quite right, sometimes one of them drops out because they don't know all the words, but they make it work. They both sing louder on the choruses and bring it down to nearly a whisper soon after.

Jóhannes is so captivated by this that it takes him ten minutes before he realizes that it's strange that he can hear them at all. There *should* be his own music drowning out their notes, but none is playing. His playlist ended a long time ago. He didn't notice. He makes an attempt to scroll through a long list of songs, trying to find something suitable, but he can't bring himself to press play.

Instead, Jóhannes digs through a large bag of snacks they're taking to Berwald's house and finds something he likes, opening it and munching absentmindedly as he stares out the window at the rain. He sighs, but it isn't the typical, fed up kind that he's known for.

Sitting here in the back seat, Jóhannes doesn't feel that he should be privy to be listening in on their singing. He's part of another world back here, his only company being his sleeping bird and the boxes piled up around him. He doesn't feel that he should belong, but he does. He doesn't *want* to feel that he might belong here, but he does. He keeps his headphones on, but he listens to the sounds that exist outside of them.

He feels warm, but he shivers and asks for the heat to be turned up.

Jóhannes looks at Halvard, and then at Henrik, and repeats this process of bouncing back between them nearly the entire way, dangerously close to raising his voice to join them.

Jóhannes has Halvard's eyebrows and many of Henrik's freckles. Sometimes that's a comfort.

Other times, it's not, and it makes him feel sick.

He only removes his headphones after they've arrived at Berwald's house, stepping out of the car and into a patch of sunshine between two summer storms.

A CASE STUDY: HALVARD SØRENSEN

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

HALVARD – descendant from the Old Norse Hallvarðr, meaning rock guardian.

(Halvard is strong, unmoving, stone-faced, who will protect those in which he cares for to the bitter end.)

SØRENSEN – meaning son of Søren, Søren itself meaning severe, strict, and serious.

(Halvard is these things too.)

SEE ALSO: A man who has been beaten down by the world, who has suffered greatly, who still suffers, silently. But also someone who enjoys life, despite the creaking of old gears in his soul. A person whose smile is worth gold, a person who loves mouthfuls of fresh air, a person suffocated by his own being, but a person who also feels satisfied with how far he's come. He's dignified, and yet brutal, a curious person who turns heads with the way his fingers trace imaginary circles the air. A paradox, a contradiction, a cat with the sharpest claws and the softest fur. There are heavy chains around the heart, many locks with missing keys he no longer owns. They weigh him down. But he keeps his head high, he fights the oncoming day head on, and while there are some nights where he curls up in defeat, he'll always win the final round.

(Vi vil vinne.

No, it's not quite like that.

Jeg vil vinne.

He has to, because he gives himself no other choice.

He *has* no other choice.)

Chapter End Notes

"Vi vil vinne" and "Jeg vil vinne" are respectively "We will win" and "I will win."
The former phrase is infamous for being written on a road in Norway during World War II and is still there today.

Black King, White Rook

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[After the Treaty of Roskilde, 1658]

Henrik looks tired, he has heavy dark circles under his eyes, but he's still smiling, mutely, down his nose at the chessboard in front of him. Bandages wrap around his head, there are cuts all over his sturdy hands, and if Halvard wasn't concerned enough already, his usual proud posture is sunk low. He is slouching, curled around himself, and even though his eyes are bright, there is also a tinge of pain reflected in them.

Halvard finds it hard to look at him from across the table. He stares at the ceiling, he runs his fingers gently over his own bandages—for he too, is also hurting—but looking directly at Henrik's face makes him feel mixed emotions that are difficult to address, so he tries his best to sweep them under the rug.

It takes five long minutes before Henrik makes his move, but he does so with great gusto when he does, knocking over Halvard's white bishop with his knight and slams the piece down onto his “kill pile” on the side.

“Your move!” he grins, and Halvard can see where Berwald knocked out a few of his teeth.

Halvard glances at the chessboard and makes his move without a second thought.

It isn't that Henrik is bad at chess, it's that Halvard is better. Halvard is one for calculation and precision, and he can devise a plan as fast and as neatly as he can cut open a fish. And it isn't like Henrik is a poor decision maker either, he just does things differently, has a different system, and Halvard doesn't expect him to operate in the same way.

Normally, Henrik is faster with his moves, but today he is agonizingly taking his time. He wants to win, he wants to make up for the enormous losses his country just suffered, he wants to regain a bit of his pride, he just wants to feel like he's not a failure. And he knows the odds are stacked against him, picking a chess match with Halvard, but right now, there isn't much he can win.

Another exchange of pieces, and Halvard practically hands him a pawn out of pity.

Halvard isn't a stranger to defeat. He understands what Henrik is feeling, and how awful it must feel to have your ego bruised that badly. As a person, Halvard is sympathetic, even if Henrik had entered the war of his own volition and ultimately, his defeat was fair.

As a nation, it's a little more complicated, and there's a part of him that's happy to see Denmark knocked down a peg. The bitterness inside him feels validated and justified, if only a little.

But it's difficult to watch your childhood friend suffering, when you can't do anything about it, and when you're also finding some happiness in it as well. He's glad, but he's worried. He's in the same boat, but also not entirely. He loves him, and yet he's not sure if he entirely does right now.

Henrik isn't chattering away like he normally does when they play. There's not the same kind of competitive passion in the air. Henrik isn't trying to make Halvard laugh by trying to stack all the pieces into a tower, he isn't making a fool out of himself by directly placing his pieces in places where Halvard can take them without risk. It's so quiet, so cold, so foreign.

“The sun was warm today,” Halvard tries.

“Yeah, it was.”

There's a smile in his direction, but the conversation ends there.

Henrik is losing. He has more pieces, but he's losing.

Halvard isn't even trying that hard today. He's giving Henrik a fair shot, but it would wound Henrik even more if Halvard just handed him the win. It wouldn't mean anything, it wouldn't fix anything, it would just be a tally-mark on their scorecard and nothing more.

And it is with so much hesitation when Halvard realizes that the move he was about to make will effectively finish the game and end any chances of Henrik claiming the victory. The white rook hovers in mid-air between where it was picked up and where it will go. There is no way out of this, there is nowhere he can go that isn't a cheap cop out and Henrik will catch on to how forgiving Halvard has been with him this match.

And Halvard is a person who thirsts for winning, who loves it, who is proud of his ability. He wants to knock over Henrik's king with such force that it falls off the table and clatters to the floor. He wants absolute victory, he wants to prove himself, he wants to break free and say 'you can never hold me down,' but he can't do it. Or rather, he chooses not to do it.

Instead, he moves his rook quietly into checkmate position and folds his hands in his lap, clenching them under the table.

“I'm sorry.”

It's a genuine apology.

“You won fair and square,” and Henrik laughs a little louder than needed, making Halvard cringe. It's fake. His smile is fake, his laughter his fake, all of it, it's fake, and Halvard wants to reach across the table and pry the illusion off Henrik's face. Halvard feels as if his heart is being torn to bits. But to cross the black and white battlefield that separates them is too much, too hard, and would only lead to further injury to a man so defeated that he has to turn around and cover his face with his hands so that Halvard can't see his tears.

He's still smiling.

“Really, Halle, it's fine,” Henrik says, trying his best to keep his voice steady.

“No, it's really not.”

They don't play another game of chess together for three hundred years.

Chapter End Notes

Many historians argue that the Treaty of Roskilde marked the end of Denmark as a major European power, or at the very least marked the beginning of Denmark's decline as a military power. While some argue otherwise, it is true that Treaty of Roskilde caused Denmark-Norway to lose a lot of land and the demands that Sweden gave Denmark were harsh.

The Hetalia comic in which Denmark and Norway mentioning playing chess and Sweden coming across the frozen sea to KO Denmark is set before Denmark's eventual defeat and the subsequent treaty.

The Poet

Chapter Notes

To the two people who reviewed me: thank you very much, I'm not that confident in my writing ability sometimes and I'm very anxious writing again, and posting publically at that! So both your comments really meant a lot to me and helped me be less anxious about starting something new and big, so thank you, truly.

Nils is going to be my name for Ladonia.

The unpacking process at Berwald's cabin is nearly mechanical. There's a tested and tried system that is efficient and precise, so it doesn't take long before everything is out of the car and in the right place. Brief hellos are exchanged before the process begins, but they're quiet, a mere formality, and don't really mean anything.

It is only after Henrik ritually announces that everything is perfect that conversation evolves into something more fluid and casual. Berwald, Henrik, and Tino decide to go fishing together. Halvard wants to wander by himself in the woods. Jóhannes volunteers to watch Berwald's children because he knows he's going to end up doing it anyway, so he might as well pretend he has a choice in the matter. Everyone parts. Jóhannes sits on the porch as Peter and Nils laugh, running around and hitting each other with wooden swords.

"Make sure they don't kill each other," Tino had told him.

"It's not like it matters anyway," Jóhannes thought. *"They're immortal like we are. They'd just reincarnate."*

He tells the two micronations to stay put for a minute before he goes inside and rummages through his personal belongings, pulling out a small leather-bound sketchbook that he could easily fit in his pocket and a nice pen he filched from Henrik's desk the last time he was in Copenhagen.

Jóhannes sits down, the kids resume playing, the Icelander puts pen on paper, but doesn't write.

A few hours pass. Nils and Peter decide to go visit the fishing group, the puffin is fed, and Jóhannes is alone, inside, at the wooden dinner table that Berwald carved himself.

By now, he has two pages filled with words, with crossed out sections and arrows indicating rearrangement. He sets the pen down and holds the book open with both hands, reading carefully and whispering to himself under his breath to go over how it sounds aloud.

"I didn't know you wrote poetry."

The book is hastily slammed shut and Jóhannes stands to face his brother, who has his fingers curled atop the back of the chair like talons. Halvard is interested, he's in a good mood, but he's still imposing to look at.

His little brother, however, is mortified.

“You! I— How much did you read?!”

“A little.” An awkward pause. “I liked it. You write well.”

“It's not for you to read.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I'm not accepting it.”

Halvard frowns, but Jóhannes is frowning harder.

“I wonder what you'd say about me if I was a poem.”

“Maybe I'll consider it!” but those words are filled with anger and irritation as Jóhannes leaves the cabin and slams the door behind him.

“You'd probably say awful things. And I probably deserve that,” Halvard whispers to himself, with hands like claws, in the empty, lonely room.

Three Brief Points Providing Evidence That Halvard Is Wrong About Himself

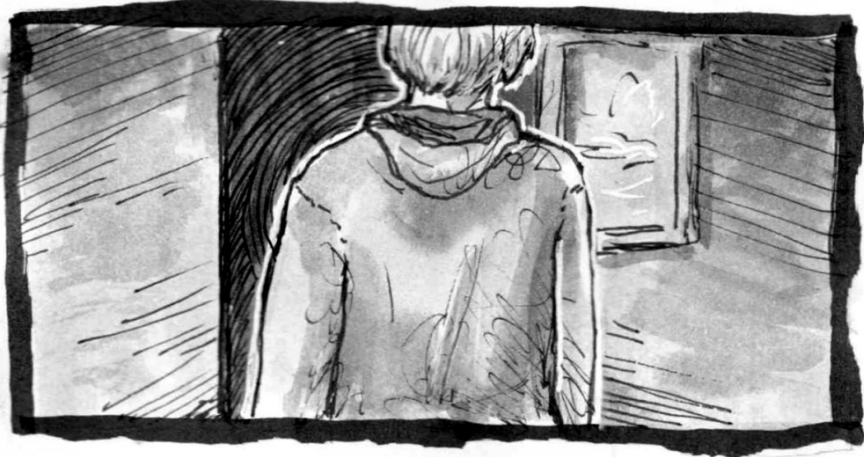
I. Jóhannes doesn't dislike him as much as Halvard thinks. Actually, Jóhannes doesn't dislike him at all.

II. Nobody faults Halvard for anything more than he faults himself. He's only ever done his best with what he's been given, even if he doesn't believe it sometimes.

III. At various points in time, Halvard has bled, starved, and died so that his brother could live. He's sacrificed for his brother, and while that alone does not prove his innocence, it does prove the gravity in which he cares.

And while its possible to care wrongly—for love can be harmful too—Halvard is in no way guilty of this.

Apple, Apple, Apples



(art by [sketchycheese](#))

[Winter, 2013]

If there is one thing that Jóhannes without a doubt likes, it's technology.

The internet is a godsend to him, he's a fan of mobile phones, and what once was a lengthy journey from his island to the rest of the world is now something that only takes a few hours.

And that isn't to say that Jóhannes doesn't enjoy wandering for hours along the rocky beaches, catching rides on fishing boats to help bring in the catch of the day, and knitting sweaters during the cold, long months. He loves those things too, they mean a lot to him, and he appreciates the world without wires.

But there's also something nice about sending an email and getting a reply the same day.

Or in this case, flying across the Atlantic and being able to visit others often.

Snow is falling in Copenhagen when he exits the airport and he takes a moment to secure his newly knitted scarf around his mouth and nose before taking a deep breath and setting off, suitcase leaving stripes on the covered sidewalk as it rolls along behind him. He knows his way around the city a lot more than he cares to admit.

He has a lot of not-so-great memories of this place.

But there's just as many good ones, too.

He takes a taxi and gazes out the window, passing the coffee shop he frequents when he's in town, a swing set that he's used many times, familiar streets he's sprinted down during the summer. His memory constructs what Copenhagen used to be like, before the street-signs and glowing lights. It's always surreal to remember so long ago, and his vision blurs as he dives deeper and deeper into the ghosts of the past that haunt his mind. The snow whirling outside the car window mixing with the darkness is like watercolor, fluid and blending, indistinct.

For a brief moment, he misses home.

Henrik's house has always given off this sense of immediate coziness, at least in terms of appearance.

Part of it, Jóhannes thinks, is because Henrik takes great care in trying to make things be that way. Unlike Berwald, who meticulously arranges things to be as perfect aesthetically as they can be, Henrik's style is one that's messy, maybe a little chaotic, but has a certain cutesy charm nonetheless. It has always been that way, in every house Henrik has ever been the ruler of, even during bad, dark times.

To an extent, it's almost creepy to have a house that radiates such warmth when inside it's historically been devoid of it.

Jóhannes huffs, his breath escaping like smoke, as he makes his way inside, the door already unlocked for him.

Today, in this day and age, Henrik's house is not a smothering, isolating place for Jóhannes.

And yet, he still tiptoes into the house like a stranger, stripping himself of boots and coat so quietly that Henrik doesn't notice his entrance over the sound of his kitchen knife chopping apples. Jóhannes slides into Henrik's view slowly, like clouds on a breezeless day, and holds a hand up in greeting. He waves, his left hand is still holding his luggage, but he makes eye contact, Henrik smiles, and the last snowflakes on Jóhannes face melt on his rosy cheeks.

“Before you ask, I'm making dessert. And I'd hug you, but I have flour and all sorts of other junk on me and I don't want to get you dirty, so count yourself lucky.”

“I wasn't going to ask.”

“Of course you weren't,” and Henrik laughs. It subsides, petering out into a low simmer of a smile, and he points his eyes downward at the cutting board.

“Halle isn't doing well today,” he says, after some hesitation.

To this, Jóhannes does pose the question of “why” over the sound of blade slicing.

“There's no real reason. Sometimes you're just sad, y'know? And it's hard to get out of bed some days, so you either force yourself, or you give yourself a break. He didn't feel like he could face the world head on today, so I told him that he didn't have to. Hence, making comfort food,” and he gestures to the dirty apron he's wearing.

“Hence. That's so old fashioned.”

Henrik ignores him.

“I know you won't ask, so I'll tell you; he'll be alright. Halle's tough, he's been through worse than this. But that doesn't mean that he wouldn't enjoy seeing you right now, I think. Just my two cents.”

Jóhannes runs a finger across his lips in thought for a moment and then ventures deeper into the house, his baggage a suitcase and a lengthy sigh.

With each step away from the kitchen, light fades from room to room, and by the time Jóhannes makes it up the stairs, standing in the doorway where Halvard is cocooned in sheets, there's nothing but darkness. Jóhannes, who has light sensitive eyes and good night vision, makes his way to the bed from memory alone. His sight does him no good, but he can hear Halvard shift to sense who entered his lair, uncurling himself like a serpent, before coiling back with a deep breath, unmoving, unspeaking, unseeable.

Jóhannes takes his laptop out of his luggage, crawls across the bed with charger in hand to feel around for an outlet, plugs it in, turns it on, and sits down on the bed next to his brother. The screen light brings a little visibility in this place, and Jóhannes takes a quick glance at Halvard's gloomy face before he rolls over. A rejection, maybe Halvard doesn't want Jóhannes to see him like this.

It hurts a little.

But Jóhannes doesn't let it sting him. He strokes Halvard's hair gently with one hand while scrolling through his twitter feed with the other. Time passes.

(You shouldn't have to do this, Halvard thinks. I am supposed to be there for you, I am supposed to protect you, our roles should be reversed.)

If Jóhannes could hear him, he would respond that he is no longer a child, and perhaps a few well-intentioned words would pour out of his mouth before he had a chance to consider them, such as *“I love you, why wouldn't I care about you, I understand your feelings but as your brother I want to care for you better, too.”*

And maybe then he'd fly out of the room, embarrassed, down the stairs, out of Henrik's house, hurriedly across the street, and fill his lungs with twilight snow.

But this doesn't happen. Not here, not today.

The words he chooses are different, even if they contain the same meaning.)

“Is it okay if I show you something?”

“Mm.”

Jóhannes shifts and places his laptop in front of Halvard's face, aligning it just right and pressing play.

“I've been watching this show, and I feel it's something you'd enjoy.”

He presses play, brings his knees to his chest, and sits there as Halvard passively watches.

But as Henrik heats the oven up downstairs, as the temperature rises in spite of the dark, as ice melts, as this unsuspecting house in the city grows warmer, Jóhannes finds himself slipping under the covers, wrapping an arm across his brother's stomach, and pressing up against him, burying his face in Halvard's sunny hair.

Two and a half episodes in, Halvard says that he likes it.

At the end of three, he's tapping on Jóhannes' arm and whispers that he wants to get up and eat.

The stairs creak as Halvard descends, bringing most of the blankets with him, wrapped around his shoulders and chest like a robe. His brother, behind him, holds the ends so that they don't drag on the floor. A royal procession, just without all the fanfare.

The king, the prince, and the royal chef sit around a circular table and eat dessert for dinner, as equals, as friends, as family.

Tomorrow is better.

(It always is.)

A CASE STUDY: HENRIK PEDERSEN

HENRIK – a name meaning ruler of the home.

(Well, he was that once, and he likes to think that he still is.)

PEDERSEN – indicating that one is a son of Peder, Peder meaning stone.

(He's a different kind of stone than Halvard, but they share the same core of strength.)

SEE ALSO: Blood. Too much of it. It's no longer there but he can feel it caked on his body. Sometimes he feels as if he's drowning in it. Crowned, it is he who is king and will forever remain one, but he sometimes wants to rip the circle that invisibly sits on his head and throw it far, far away. Someone who is haunted by his memories and wakes up in the night crying with his hand clamped tightly across his mouth to dampen his sobbing. A lion's mane, a person who is as bright as the sun and just as dangerous. Inside he is burning, burning, on fire, so much that it leaks out of his pores and every breath he exhales is warmer, brighter. A person who laughs too hard for all the laughter he took away. A person who cares too much because he once caused nothing but trouble for others. A person who cries too much because he sheds tears for those who can't or won't.

(Smiling, smiling, smiling.

He carries the stars on his back and the sun inside of him.

All he wants is to bring happiness to those around him.

An eternal forge inside his heart, he spends his days smithing just that.)

The Old Kingdoms

The meeting of the three Nordic powers of old is, always, to say the least, an adventure.

They've been friends while their countries have been enemies and enemies when their countries have been friends. And of course, at times, friend and enemy have matched up perfectly, and no internal emotional conflict exists.

Today, they are friends, both as people and as kingdoms.

There's always some squabbling between them, still. But all good friends argue at least some of the time. Nothing has changed since childhood.

Halvard is reading under a shady tree. Berwald is whittling something out of wood. Henrik is waist-deep in lake water, with Peter over his head, threatening to throw him, while Nils tries to climb up him like a tree to save his sibling from the playful wrath of his uncle.

Splashes, screams, and laughter. Halvard's eyes narrow to keep his focus over the noisiness. Berwald keeps looking up to check that things aren't getting out of hand. The sunlight is harsh during midday. Their mouths are dry. Evening will come faster than they think, but the sun will not set during these fleeting white nights.

Halvard turns over a page.

Hours later the children are asleep. Tino and Jóhannes chat idly about various oddities over homemade cookies and a game of Scrabble, mixing the Icelandic and Finnish versions together just for fun. They question each other as to whether or not some of the words they're playing are actual words in their respective languages. Tino laughs and asks if he has any reason to lie about his many voweled words. Jóhannes mumbles that Tino doubting him and his native tongue hurts.

Both of them are cheating.

Beyond the cozy indoors, down by the lake again, the final three remain. At the end of the dock lies Halvard, flat on his stomach with his head peaking over the edge, with a single arm dangling down to disrupt the stillness of the water with his fingernail, circling round and around on the surface like an ice skater. To his left sits his violin, in the worn out case that he just can't seem to part with.

On shore, Henrik is tuning his guitar while relying on Berwald's better hearing to do it correctly. "How about this?" "A bit more." "Now?" "More." And it goes on.

When "Halle!" is heard from land, Halvard sighs and lifts himself up, wiping his finger on his pants unceremoniously, and brings his body and his case to join them.

He, unlike the other two, stands as he uncases the instrument, tightening the horsehair in the bow with a few twists and coats it with rosin, thinking of the time that Jóhannes had stuck the amber colored mass into his mouth once, thinking it was candy before realizing his mistake.

Halvard is quicker to tune and warm his fingers up than Henrik, playing a short but complex melody by himself, to which Henrik teases him for being a show-off before he gets smacked gently with the bow. Berwald laments a little that he's reduced to keeping beat on a piece of wood and misses the piano sitting at home, but Halvard assures him of his importance, asking Berwald to start.

They play together and soon become lost as their fingers drum and pluck and slide through the air, Halvard on his feet and practically dancing as he circles the other two with the rising and falling of his bow.

Midnight strikes and they cross over into a new day without even knowing it.

“They're still playing, huh?” Tino asks while scrubbing dishes over the sink.

Jóhannes shrugs, the last cookie in his mouth, sorting the tiles into which language set they belong to.

Tino finds himself sighing deeply as he finishes washing the plate in his hands, putting it away but not starting on the mugs and spoons that still remain. He's still, looking at the dishes and then to the window, sighing again, and the corners of his mouth turn downwards, just a little.

“Hey,” the younger begins, concerned. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing major,” and Tino shakes his head slowly.

“I just miss someone right now, that's all.”

The Sixth Man

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[Estonia, Tallin, 2002]

Every morning, for as long as this apartment has been his home, Eduard waters his houseplants and rearranges them in front of the window. There are three of them, each a different plant, and he smiles at them as he turns the flowerpots in his hands slowly to check for any problems. It is a ritual he's done every day, every year, without fail unless he's been out of town.

Fifty years? Maybe more.

At this point, it's not just a habit anymore, but a way to relieve anxiety. For as uncertain and unpredictable as the world is, Eduard can count that every day, without fail, his plants will be there, in their ceramic pots, reaching towards the sky. Or so he tells himself.

Of course, plants cannot survive as long as he can. Despite the longevity of some species, everything does end. And no amount of care in the world can save a dying leaf from falling, soundless, onto the floor. Over the course of a week, sometimes a healthy plant will fade away, and one morning he'll run his fingers down the dry, wilted stem, and frown. It is replaced, a new plant in the same chipped container, and life carries on as before, without hesitation, without mourning, without a second thought.

What started as a way to bring something to look forward to every day when he wasn't very happy became a ritual, one he might not need anymore, but one he has no intention of breaking.

His plants are his conversational partners, he sings to them, tells them how he's feeling, and even if nobody responds to his words disintegrating in the still, dry air, it's okay.

He's used to living alone and he prefers it.

Tino doesn't have a personal opinion on whether his cousin winning the Eurovision Song Contest before he did is funny, sad, or something in between. This has been a repeated topic of discussion when they meet up every few weekends—a recent luxury they don't take for granted—to have lunch, chat, and simply appreciate each other's presence.

“You have a lot to do still,” Tino says, adjusting his bangs as they sit on a park bench. “Are you worried?”

Eduard thinks for a moment, humming aloud and crossing his arms, before echoing the words of something one of his politicians said.

“We will simply walk in singing,” and he smiles, “That's the only thing we can do. I'm worried because I want it to go as smoothly as possible, of course, but I think my people can handle it.”

Tino nods in agreement, jumps to his feet, and dares Eduard to race him up the hill.

Eduard knows, from the moment those words left Tino's lips, that he would lose. Matching his

neighbor to the north in contests of physical strength and endurance will end in certain failure, but he tries anyway, sending pigeons flying and attracting the stares of many as they run, laughing, with Eduard collapsing to the ground, panting hard, after finishing last.

Tino lends out a hand to help him to his feet, and he takes it.

He loves him, but there are things that Tino doesn't quite understand about Eduard anymore, and vice versa, since the Cold War ended. That's to be expected, but occasionally they can sense in the air that something just isn't the way it was before, and it leaves a sinking feeling in Eduard's stomach, as their fingers slip away from one another.

Eduard prefers thick books and binary code, sitting down for hours, even days, filling his head, calculating, putting information together, and synthesizing it. It satisfies him, he likes that sort of work, and if he had been born human, that's the kind of life he'd want for himself.

Tino would leave him to his studies when they were younger and instead roam vast woods, hunt swiftly, take care of home affairs, and still have enough power in him to wrestle and bring people to their knees, laughing and smiling the entire time.

They are similar countries, but radically different people.

Sometimes they stare at each other and try to figure out what exactly has changed about each other in each other's absence, because they still care about each other equally, if not more, than they did before. But the feeling has changed. They can pour their hearts out to each other, but nothing makes up for the time lost, some experiences and pain cannot be fully understood by others, and one cannot expect one person to match you perfectly. It is the way of the world, it always has been.

It makes him sad, a little, seeing Tino at world meetings hanging out with the rest of the Nordics, because Eduard feels that he, too, should belong there. He is no stranger to Henrik, or Berwald, and even Halvard will acknowledge his presence as he enters the circle to join the conversation. But the message is clear: Tino has been accepted, but he hasn't. Group jokes fly over his head, Halvard stares at him uneasily the whole time, and he knows that it isn't intentional, but it still hurts.

Because once upon a time, before the great splitting of Europe, Tino and Eduard were on the same level, with the same opportunities and the same dreams. The Estonians consider themselves a Nordic people, and they have no reason why they shouldn't feel that way. It is unfair, unjust, and unbelievable the fate his nation drew, and while he understands that life is ultimately indifferent to all the plights that plague this world, he still feels robbed.

He loves him, but it's complicated.

And maybe one day, his people will be recognized for what they believe they are.

Sometimes, he wakes up in the middle of the night with a jolt, sweating from dreams he wishes he wouldn't have, pours himself a glass of water, and overthinks.

Then there are the nights in which he's awoken by the sound of his phone ringing, and he doesn't truly feel awake until he hears Toris crying on the other side of the line, trying to get words out of his mouth that Eduard can understand instead of the quick, stuttering Lithuanian that he can't help. He isn't the only one with nightmares, and you would be hard-pressed to find a nation who doesn't

occasionally wake in the night and finds themselves crying.

Finally, Toris manages to speak slowly enough for Eduard to piece the words together.

“We're going to be okay, right?”

And Eduard knows that he can't promise him anything, for this world changes too much.

“Yeah, we're going to be fine.”

He says it anyway.

Eduard sings for him and they talk about their fears until the sun comes up.

Eduard clearly remembers the day Tino came to visit him after his most recent independence, spotting each other through the crowd and sprinting towards each other with tears welling up in both of their eyes. Tino had slammed him to the ground with a forceful hug and he winces at the thought of the bruises the impact left, but he doesn't regret the feeling of the embrace for a second often thinks about how much he longed for it.

Things are different now. They have different friends, maybe, different definitions of what constitutes "normality" and even if their bodies haven't aged in the past two hundred years, their minds have.

Perhaps the world will separate them again, besides from the small sea that divides them now, but even so, Eduard could wait, as he has before, in the strange, melody-loving country that he represents.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of chapter notes on this one, mostly historical footnotes.

- Estonia won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2001, the first ex-Soviet state to do so, and hosted it in 2002. In reference to this, Mart Laar (a former Prime Minister) had said "We demolished the Russian empire by singing; now we are not knocking on the door of Europe but will simply walk in singing" which is a reference to the counter-Soviet demonstrations known as the Singing Revolution and the fact that singing is important to the Estonian people culturally. I thought it was interesting and wanted to write about that.

- Finland, in contrast, participated much longer in ESC than Estonia did and had never won the contest (to the point that jokes about "Hell will freeze over before Finland wins" were very common in the Eurovision world). They have since won, however.

- In terms of the Estonian-Finnish cultural bond, there are a lot of things I could say about this, because there is a lot of cultural/lingual similarities and they generally think of each other fondly as people, but the bottom line is that there is this concept of "brotherhood" that exists between the two. Which is why I ship APH Estonia/Finland queerplatonically.

- The issue of Estonia being considered a Nordic issue is a tough one. I should state that I, as an American, do not think I can validly answer this issue because I'm not directly involved and this isn't my issue, but I want to speak a bit about this anyway.

The general consensus I've discovered after reading books and talking to Estonians, Finns, and Norwegians/Swedes/Icelanders is that the Nordic 5 view Estonia as non-Nordic, whereas the Estonians are adamant that they should be included in the group as the Nordic 6 because of their cultural/historical ties to Denmark, Sweden, and Finland.

During the interwar period where Estonia and Finland became independent states, they were similar in terms of infrastructure and on the "same level" to an extent, but with the second World War and Estonia subsequently forcefully becoming Soviet whereas Finland didn't, Finland relied on and became more like Sweden/Norway/Denmark and by the end of the Cold War, the economic/infrastructure difference between Finland and Estonia was staggering.

A lot of historians think the lack of accepting Estonia is primarily because of this element of "lost time" due to the Cold War and it's postulated that had Estonia not been a Soviet state, what we now know as the Nordic 5 may have been the Nordic 6. I, more or less, agree with this.

The Baltic States are mainly grouped together because of their historical circumstances, but the Baltics themselves don't entirely see themselves as a cohesive group as say, the Nordics do, because of Lithuania's ties to Poland and Estonia's to Finland. Not to say that the Baltics DON'T have a sense of togetherness, but I don't think it runs as deep as people tend to think mainly because this idea of "Baltic brotherhood" is fairly recent.

The bottom line is "do I as a person consider Estonia Nordic/should Estonia be treated as a Nordic?" and the short answer is "yes" and the long answer is "yes, but I also understand why it isn't by a lot of people and there are valid reasons for that, and I don't entirely blame people for thinking otherwise." And again, I'm an American with no cultural ties to Estonia/Nordic 5, I just have a strong interest, so my opinion might not be well informed or as valid since I'm only an outsider and I shouldn't be speaking for either group definitively.

The jokes about APH Estonia wanting to join the Nordic 5 both in canon and out of canon are pretty true in terms of what the Estonians want, but it's important to note that it isn't treated as a joke by the Estonians and they're Pretty Serious about it as a whole.

If anyone wants to discuss this with me/correct me/give me their opinion 100% welcome it!

Ashblind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[Iceland, 1783]

It is a common misconception, due to Jóhannes' young age, he remained close to Halvard and Henrik most of his life, spending many of his years away from his homeland under the guidance and control of his elders, but this isn't the truth.

It is true that he did leave Iceland behind during various times of his life, mostly for political reasons, but the land of fire and ice will forever remain his home, his preferred place of existence.

Even if he had the body of a child, he would demand that he needed to go back home, and he would get his way, for what would Henrik and Halvard be if they denied Jóhannes his rightful place?

Blood and war have been commonplace in the history of mankind. Jóhannes has watched his country war with itself, he's seen his brother's head chopped clean off, he's pounded on Henrik's chest while screaming at him to keep on living as blood drained from the wound deep in Henrik's stomach. As much as he adores puffins, he's killed too many to count out of necessity. Blood is thicker than water, a famous saying goes, but as Jóhannes has felt the cool red drops fall from his arms after skinning an animal, he doesn't think there's much of a difference.

Death is a part of life as much as human conflict is a part of existence.

Whereas his elder Nordics have seasoned themselves in battle—efficient, unstoppable killing machines—he's not sure that he could ever be that way. He's too gentle, doesn't care for unnecessary violence, and war is never something that has appealed to him as a person. He knows it isn't like Halvard enjoys ripping life from others, but his brother does it without hesitation without any doubt. But perhaps, due to his age, he's been shielded from what has driven the three Nordic kingdoms to his south to become survivalists.

As he walks across the grassy fields with a flock of Icelandic sheep following him, he mentally corrects himself. The people of Iceland are survivalists, too, in this harsh, unforgiving landscape that they call home. Nature is both the ultimate ally and the ultimate enemy.

And it is today that this becomes more than apparent, as the volcano of Laki erupts suddenly, spewing ash and magma from the earth, and as he watches this from afar, he sinks to his knees in terror.

At this point nobody knows that this eruption will last eight months, cause the majority of Iceland's livestock to die, and subsequently kill off a quarter of the population from starvation. It will cause massive crop failures in Europe and cool the temperature of the entire world. This will be the deadliest eruption since people have populated the earth and not a soul has any idea what is in store.

But as the plume of ash rises higher and higher towards the heavens, Jóhannes doesn't think about hypotheticals. His throat feels like it's on fire and he can't tell if his eyes itch because he's crying or

because of the fallout. There is nothing but this overwhelming sense of dread, of helplessness, of cowardice overshadowed by the wrath of the planet unfolding before him. He wants to yell for help, but who will listen? Who could help him and his people, far away from the rest of the world? Who could even attempt to seal the ground back up with a bandage as if it was nothing but a small scrape?

Nobody could help him. He knew that.

He still screams out the names of people he loves who are across the ocean, as if they could hear him and would rescue him as they've done before, even though he knows he's using his voice in vain. Jóhannes' tears dampen the arid soil as he turns and flees, running back to town, trying to find comfort amongst people who are just as distraught as he is.

He feels alone in this world.

(The eruption leaves his hair ashy and his eyes purple, from the blonde and blue they were before, and the next time Henrik and Halvard see him, they start crying.)

Chapter End Notes

Based before the Mist Hardships (Móðuharðindin) of Iceland.

Sunlight / Sunlit Night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Let us rewind back to the first day of this vacation, where Jóhannes wrote his first poem of the trip (but certainly not his last), and instead follow the path that Halvard took, alone, deep into the woods.

He had good reason to split from everyone. Asides from Halvard's long-standing love affair with the concept of solitude and his tendency for sound and people to overwhelm his senses, he had to exchange greetings with the other people they'd be sharing this area with for the trip.

Even if there are hiking trails, he doesn't take them. A thick curtain of leaves envelops him as he slides into the green brush with ease.

Nobody sees them. Berwald believes him and asks questions sometimes, but he's never been able to see what Halvard does. Henrik is supportive too, respecting Halvard's second sight for what it is, but Henrik's truth about the world has no room for such things. Tino humors him, Jóhannes nods but he's not listening, shutting it out because he believes it's all nonsense. Or maybe he does believe, but doesn't want to admit it in this day and age.

And that's fine. Nobody said you have to believe in what other people experience. You just have to recognize that for some, it is so, and let them hold onto their truths just as much as you hold onto yours.

The nature spirits of the land are the first to greet him, circling around his body curiously before recognizing him. *It's Halle! Halle's back!* And they excitedly swirl, seeping back into the earth and through the brambles to spread word across these mountains of his return. But Halvard doesn't stop walking, simply nodding in the direction of whomever he encounters. The ground seems to sigh dreamily with life with every step he takes. Trolls make their way down from the mountains, elves laugh as they cross paths with him.

There are only a handful of humans (and a slimmer number of nations) that retain the ability to see spirit-folk. Those who can tend to attract a lot of attention, quickly becoming favorites of the local mythical creatures simply because they are recognized, finally, by somebody.

And for Halvard, who is, quite frankly, a very old man who has been to a great number of places, he's something of a superstar in the otherworld.

He sits down on a mossy rock as he's crowded around and doted upon. They have questions about his life and relationships (as they've been following what they refer to as “the Nordic soap opera” for centuries) and he'll provide answers. Halvard only has to whisper quietly, barely passing air between his lips, for his voice to be heard by all. “Will you play music for us tonight, together with your friends?” some of them wonder, to which Halvard responds with a nod.

They want to show him what has changed in the year that he's been gone, so they lead him to a new stream or a young sapling that has promise. He treats this seriously, laying on his stomach to observe the flow of water or patting the ground around the tree to bring it luck. In an era where nature can be swayed by the hand of man, Halvard still asks for good harvests and pleasant weather

for his people every year. There's no harm in believing it helps.

After some time, many of the other-folk return to hiding amongst the mushrooms and stones that litter the countryside. They are satisfied with the man who walks on the fine line between two different worlds and request that he returns soon with more stories and pleasant melodies, as they ask every year.

Sunlight filters down through the trees and warms patches of his skin as he slides down a steep hillside with grace.

A nisse that lingers behind asks him if he thinks that one day, when he stops reincarnating and finally exits the physical world, if, perhaps, he'll become a myth himself.

“I can only hope so,” he says, pushing back a branch and smiling.

Let us jump forward to the second evening of this vacation, after the first night's music and games of lying, and focus back on Halvard, who is in bed, awake, and thinking.

He hasn't always been an insomniac. In his early childhood he slept well, but as the years ticked onwards, sleep began to escape him. Nobody who comes into this world leaves unharmed, and various stresses and traumas have molded him into an exhausted person who can never rest enough. He sighs, pushing back some of the bedsheets that cover his bare chest, and stares up at the wooden ceiling with eyes heavy, but wide open. He hears the breath both of the person sleeping next to him and that of the others in the cabin. Halvard sighs again, this time with a hint of agitation.

He's done with this.

Halvard is an expert at getting out of bed without being heard. He can slide out of the sheets as if he was never even there, and had the cabin floors not creaked under his weight, his footsteps would've been soundless too. Like the silent wings of an owl, he whisks himself out the door, barefoot and unclothed asides from underwear, to stand outside in the cool wind of a night where the sun still clings close to the horizon. A perpetual dusk. An endless dawn.

He strips, steps into the lake, and wades until the water is up to his waist.

Thirty minutes later, he hears footsteps and another body entering the water, feeling the small ripples of displacement against his skin, and yet Halvard doesn't turn around. He flinches as arms circle around him, but as he's pulled backwards into a warm, tight hug, he relaxes. A head rests on his shoulders, and although he can already tell who it is by the way their head rests in the crook of his neck, Halvard reaches a hand over his shoulder anyway to run his wet fingers through Henrik's hair. It takes but a second to recognize the texture, but he leaves his fingers interwoven for a while before ruffling it and returning his hand to the water with a splash.

“Why are you awake?” Halvard whispers.

“I could ask you the same thing. Can't sleep?”

“Mm. You?”

“Woke up cause I was thirsty, noticed you were gone, and you weren't in the house so I figured

you'd be here or in the woods. And I'm glad it wasn't the woods, you're too good at hiding in 'em.”

“You're just awful at hide and seek.”

“I can't be *perfect* at *everything* like *you* are, Halle.”

Halvard snorts. “I'm not perfect.”

“Then, you're good enough,” Henrik adjusts his head and kisses Halvard on the cheek, “And that's all anyone could ever ask for.”

“Thanks,” comes out of Halvard quickly, and yet with a bit of hesitation. He shakes his hands free of water as best he can before laying both palms over Henrik's arms around him. He presses a little, and looks down. He speaks the word again, slower this time, removing the biting harshness in his voice that he so often defaults to . Without it, his tone seems so soft, fragile, and small. “I mean it.”

"You're always welcome," Henrik laughs, and Halvard can't help his lips turn upwards, just slightly, too.

They stay like this for a while, intertwined, with Henrik's eyes focused on the black lake below while Halvard's drift to the painted sky above, the faint tops of trees in his periphery the only sign that land even exists in this twilight.

The temptation of early morning coffee, made before everyone else wakes up, is the only thing that separates them from this spot and from each other.

Chapter End Notes

Brief in-text stuff first: a nisse is a kind of Norwegian mythical creature that aph Norway has been depicted with before from what I remember (but I could be wrong since it's been a while and I don't always trust my memory).

Into the Sea

[An undisclosed year during the viking era.]

On the shores of Norway, the three are together, again, in youthful folly, to brave the rough waves that could take them to lands unknown if they play their cards right.

Berwald has brought some of his best sailors from the east and Henrik the same from the south. Halvard provides the boat, one he helped carve himself. But while Henrik is excitedly talking about the new world that they haven't found yet, Berwald and Halvard are actually working, both of them irritated slightly as Henrik forgets the tasks he was assigned and occasionally has to be physically redirected back to loading cargo. But they are fond of him, just as much as they are fond of each other. It's what makes Henrik Henrik, just as much as Halvard's sharp tongue and Berwald's stubbornness are endearing—but also obnoxious.

“We're going to be great! They'll write great sagas of our journey!” he bounces with energy.

Henrik's frame hasn't yet filled out and there's a certain lankiness to him, but it suits him as he widely grins with his crooked teeth and puffs out his chest. There will come a time over the next few centuries where Henrik will outgrow Halvard, who is currently taller, stronger, and has thus far glided through puberty swiftly in comparison to Henrik's awkward tumbling through it. But for now, Halvard gives him a dismissive but amused glance, walks over to Henrik, ruffles his hair, calls him childish, pats Henrik's head down to rub in that he's bigger, and snorts before going back to assist Berwald.

Berwald already has his strong jawline and fierce features, although his eyes droop downwards and he looks more sad than scary. His fingers fumble as he tries to tie a knot—the only visible sign of his anxiety about leaving—but Halvard steadies them, guiding him through the steps without making eye contact. His voice is raspy, not yet dropping into the booming voice he'll be infamous for in the future, as he thanks Halvard.

There are other people around them—physically older but children in comparison to the years they've existed. They may be younger in appearance but Henrik knows how to guide by way of stars better than the elders and Berwald's developed a decent internal compass over the years. They both have great value.

Halvard will stay and await their return. For he, too, is valued here, in his homeland. All signs from the gods above and the earth below have promised a safe journey and great reward for all three of them.

“You'll be safe,” Halvard not so much asks but states, and receives two kisses and two hugs.

Halvard watches their boat drift out to sea until he can no longer see Henrik wildly waving both his own arm and Berwald's unwilling one.

Every morning, Halvard wakes up and goes to work immediately, assisting the villagers in this seaside town with whatever they need. Sometimes there's nothing for him to do, so he busies himself with inventive but meaningless tasks.

On the mornings when he finds he's not needed, he goes down to the beach.

He waits, skipping rocks across choppy waves, watching seabirds squabble over fish, and often just sits in thought as he scans the horizon for any sign of change.

Weeks pass, then months.

He still has faith. He's worried, but unwavering. He passes the time by writing runes in the sand, creating new sigils with his fingernail, and conversing aloud with himself. The younger children come down with him sometimes, to chase after shorebirds and misbehave out of the sight of their parents. Dumping sand on your best friend's head is just another milestone in life and Halvard doesn't see anything wrong with a little bit of mischief.

A year, then two, then three. Halvard grows just a smidge and he trades animal pelts for a sturdier weapon. Nothing changes otherwise.

And then one day, he wakes up, and he just inexplicably knows that Berwald and Henrik are dead.

His heart sinks in the same way their boat and bodies did into the depths of the ocean: slowly, quietly, plunging deeper and deeper until not a single ray of light can permeate the depths.

Halvard rushes down to the sea, as if he's expecting to be proved wrong, as if Henrik's lighthearted laughter and Berwald's kind eyes will be there, with the boat, and enough treasure to get them anything they could ever dream of.

But there's nothing, not even a plank of driftwood.

And oh, how he tries to deny his heart, but he knows, he just knows.

Halvard drops to his knees and starts screaming, tearing out fistfuls of sand and throwing them, one after another, leaving sharp lines on the beach with his nails that resemble something more monster-made than human. He keeps doing this, as if it were possible that with enough sand he could build a path to wherever they are and bring their bodies back ashore.

He's shaking with sadness but his face just looks angry, betrayed, hurt.

As the waves inch closer to him, he tries a different tactic, bailing out water from the sea as if to drain it. Just as the words he wishes he could compose slip away from him, so does the water from in-between his fingers. Anything he wants to say right now is caught somewhere between his lungs and his throat, just as the water leaves only grains of sand behind, settled neatly between the seams of his fingers.

They found their other new world at last, but it wasn't the one they had sought.

And while Berwald and Henrik will both eventually find their way back to his side, Halvard, who hasn't shed a single tear during these years, can't help but let the iron fortress fall temporarily so that the pent up water he's been keeping inside of him can rush freely into the sea.

White King, Black Pawn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[Copenhagen, 1820]

There is something inherently cruel about having to sit in on meetings without making a peep when the subject of discussion is you. But such is the life of a nation.

Henrik sits with his hands folded neatly into his lap, listening to trade proposals and foreign policy hypotheticals with his eyes half open, nodding halfheartedly along and occasionally giving a brief comment about how he feels, but tries not to let his opinion sway that of others. That is his purpose, to be an observer, to give feedback. But Henrik, as mighty the Kingdom of Denmark is (or rather, once was), has no control over his fate. He had no control over Halvard's departure in 1814, and honestly, had wanted him to stay, but undesirable friction had been irritating their relationship both as people and as nations for the last several decades. While they parted as people on amicable terms, they didn't kiss each other goodbye, and there was part of Henrik that felt strangely relieved.

He trusted Berwald to take care of Halvard—he had always had faith in that, for Berwald could do things for Halvard that Henrik could never do himself. Henrik couldn't complete Halvard much in the same way Halvard couldn't complete Henrik. Berwald was a quiet gentle winter in comparison to Henrik's blazing summer, and in between them lay Halvard, both a decaying autumn and a renewing spring. Despite the wounds the three of them had caused each other over the years, and even if Berwald was currently resentful of Henrik and his nation's behavior, he wouldn't take that out on Halvard. In fact, it was much more likely that they would complain about Henrik in private while lying side by side, enjoying that sense of friendly intimacy.

And that was fair, Henrik thought, for he had complained about Berwald to Halvard in much the same way.

The Kingdom of Denmark-Norway's last chat, sitting cross-legged on a bed that was no longer theirs, had not been about themselves and the thorns that were starting to prick each other, but of Jóhannes.

“You have to take care of him, and look after him for me. Do the best you can.”

“I will. I promise.”

Jóhannes was too young to really understand why his brother left, even though Halvard had told him multiple times, holding him close to his chest as they read books aloud together. His elder brother kept trying to give him advice, to pass on something that Jóhannes could hold onto in however long they'd be apart. But Halvard was too old and Jóhannes too young, and the last days they spent together were not what the either had been expecting.

“I love you,” Halvard had told him, stroking his hair and smiling. “Thank you for being so good, and I'm sorry I have to go.”

And even as he walks away, Jóhannes doesn't understand.

"Denmark doesn't need Iceland, not in the same way Norway needed their exports," says an official seated around the table, a comment that makes Jóhannes shrivel up in his seat and Henrik's face contort. Henrik attempts, upon seeing Jóhannes try so hard to keep his tears back, to tell him without interrupting the meeting that it doesn't mean that Henrik doesn't need him. He explains that the country sides of them and the people sides of them are different, but the hurt is still done.

It has been years and Jóhannes searches for traces of his brother in every nook and cranny of Henrik's home. He looks at himself in the mirror and traces the lines of his face, trying to find aspects of it that reminds him of his dear brother Halle. As freckles start to dot his skin as he ages, the same sort of uneven clusters that cross Henrik's nose, he has to turn away from himself in frustration.

He asks Henrik for what Halvard's favorite books were—the ones he read countless times but he didn't take with him to Sweden—and Jóhannes and Henrik both bond over the ghost of a person who no longer haunts the dark corners of this house.

A question, as posed by Jóhannes: What was Halle's favorite color?

An answer, as sighed by Henrik: It always changed, but last I remember it was a dark, dark blue.

Sometimes Jóhannes sleeps in the spot where Halvard did, wondering if he'd remember the smell of his brother and the gentle touch of his hands if he simply dreamed hard enough. Sometimes Henrik lies next to him and Jóhannes asks too many questions, some that have answers that are too heavy and complicated for him to understand. Henrik tries, as Halvard requested, to be a father, a replacement, and to keep to his word.

Q: What was his favorite song? How did the snow make him feel? Do you miss him too?

A: I can sing the melody, but it'll never match how he sang it. He shivered, inside and out, but it reminded him that he was alive. But, don't we all, Jói?

Jóhannes isn't so sure, and when he turns to look at Henrik's pale lips, cranked into a smile despite the heavy dragging lines down his face, he has a feeling that Henrik isn't telling the whole truth.

"I wanna learn how to play chess," Jóhannes states to him while they're eating breakfast one morning.

Henrik is exhausted today, and any friend of his would know by subtle cues that all he wants to do is go back into bed, scream into his pillow, maybe cry for a while, and just leave all of his responsibilities behind him. But Jóhannes is a kid, he doesn't deserve to experience Henrik's outburst. So he takes a long sip of his drink to buy himself time to prepare a giddy smile and excited gestures by the time Jóhannes speaks a second time.

Q: Will you teach me?

A: Of course! When I get home from work today if we can find a set, maybe!

It's not until the weekend that Henrik finds Halvard's chess set, gathering dust in a box in the closet.

Copenhagen speaks, and they want to keep Jóhannes in Denmark, even though he really belongs with his people on his little island, far, far away. Henrik is genuinely glad about this. Jóhannes is conflicted.

Chess lessons begin. They practice every night. Henrik lets him win a few times, but Jóhannes has Halvard's acute observation and a tad of his wit. The younger quickly reprimands the elder for not coming at him fairly and that he ought not to keep on lying like that.

They start over, switching sides, and Henrik plays seriously, crushing Jóhannes before he even has a chance to retaliate.

Black pieces, white pieces, did it even really matter which side he was on?

“I look forward to the day that you beat me, fair and square.”

“Do you really think I can?”

“Of course. I've only ever beat your brother once. You have it in you.”

And so Jóhannes resolves to become the memory of Halvard; as sharp as a knife, as unshakable as a statue, and a devilishly good chess player.

Henrik bumps his elbow and winces, but laughs instead, as if it is nothing, even though it hurts.

Jóhannes copies.

Twenty years later and Jóhannes still hasn't seen his brother. Things have been busy is the excuse, or that Halvard had to go up into the mountains for a bit of self reflection. Berwald's sick and can't request it, they can't risk Halvard leaving right now. He sent a letter, but half of it got damaged in the mail. We can't go right now Jóhannes, there's too much to do.

So he starts to throw the idea around his room like a ball, bouncing away from him and hitting the wall before rolling back. It's okay, it isn't. He doesn't care anymore, he does. He's grown two inches and he's a year older, with more freckles peppered on his face, but Henrik comments that some of his expressions are very “Halle-ish,” a term Jóhannes hears a lot in relation to himself but has little idea what it means.

He should forget about his brother, or he shouldn't move on. Should. Shouldn't. Should. Shouldn't. And then, he throws the idea too far, and out the open window it goes into the summer air, knocking down something in the process with a clatter.

Well, so much for that.

Henrik's gone today, so he's “responsible” for the house now that he's old enough to answer the door without hiding behind Henrik or whatever nearby furniture is around.

This place used to be so magical when he was younger, but now he realizes all the things that are missing to make this a proper home. Henrik is still doing the best he can as a single person with a very demanding job, but a rift starts to divide them. Jóhannes picks fights with him, arguing long into the night.

The Pawn says: I want to go, why won't you let me go?!

The King says: But where Jóhannes, where would you go? And to do what? I'm afraid they won't

let me do that. What do you want me to do to make it better? What can I do to help you?

And Jóhannes doesn't answer, because he doesn't know.

Some days, before Henrik finds his way back home, he dashes out the door and heads deep into town, away from this house that does nothing but steal the warmth out of his very soul.

This is his home and he wants to run from it in favor of isolation.

Chapter End Notes

- The 1800s was a rough time for Iceland as a nation. Norway was Iceland's primary trade partner, but Denmark had little need for Icelandic exports. During this time, Iceland grew poorer, but an independence movement started to arise, eventually leading to Denmark granting Iceland home rule in 1874, while still under the Danish crown.

A CASE STUDY: JÓHANNES HRAFNSSON

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

JÓHANNES – a name for someone graced by god.

(He hates this name because it feels so common and he doesn't think that the meaning fits him.

His brother has never told him that this wasn't his original name.)

HRAFNSSON – son of a raven.

(This, however, fits. They say Iceland was found by way of raven. His existence is due to a black bird.

How awful.)

SEE ALSO: Someone who has jagged rocks piercing through his heart. He's been hurt over and over again and the scars have solidified into blockades in his throat. He feels sooty-black like a young puffin but he's as white as snow. One who is lonely, who has spend a large portion of his life across miles of water, and even with his hands extended to bridge the sea of separation, he doesn't feel he can reach out and hold on. He wants to be independent but he does not yet realize that nobody accomplishes anything alone. A person who asks "why?" way too much. Lava pumps through his veins and ice hangs around his head like a circlet. The human personification of a wave. A beautiful wasteland. Survival against all odds. Bruises that did not heal so much as sink into his skin, deep in the ocean whose rough waters lap at his sides. They ache, they feel like ghosts, and he mourns the same repeated feelings day after day.

(And despite this,

He'll find his way, eventually.

As the raven did.

As we all do.)

Chapter End Notes

- Iceland has been "discovered" multiple times, but the first purposeful exploration* (or at least, that we know) was done by a Norwegian named Flóki Vilgerðarson, commonly known as Hrafna-Flók, or "Raven-Flóki," due to using ravens to guide him to Iceland. I gave Jóhannes that surname because in a sense, he IS a raven's son, since it's debatable whether or not Iceland would've been found so quickly had it not been for the bird.

*I want to thank tumblr user blaane for correcting me on this point because I originally had said that Flóki had also permanently settled Iceland, but this is untrue, quoting them: "When your looking in the Landnámabók you can find the name of Ingólfur Arnason who is named as the first permanent settler in 874. He settled at the

place which is nowadays called Reykjavik." Interesting stuff, thanks again for that correction!

- Jóhannes isn't Jóhannes' original given name. Why then, is he named Jóhannes? A few reasons. First is that names change over time. Sometimes people adopt new names during their lifetime. New names are invented, and I think it's realistic for some of the cast (being as old as they are) to not bear their original name because it has fallen out of favor, they started getting called something else, etc. I also think it's a good headcanon for working around names that aren't accurate to the countries' culture/naming policy in canon, to some extent.

The second is that I had come up with these names a very very long time ago and had learned more about each country since then. I cannot find Jóhannes existing thus far in my research as a possible name for Norse peoples during the time of Iceland's settlement. Jóhannes, therefore, cannot possibly be his name at the time of "birth" if this is true.

I had a long debate with myself whether or not to change Jóhannes to another name or keep it when returning to this fandom. I really like the nickname form of Jóhannes and wanted to keep it if possible, so I settled for a compromise: Jói has always been Jói, it's just his full name that has changed. From what I can tell in researching, Jói works for any name that starts with the Jó- root. So essentially, at some point in time before he can remember, the long form of his name changed into something more modern for a reason that I have not fully headcanoned out. His nickname, which is probably what he was more often called, hasn't changed a bit.

So what is Jóhannes' original name you might ask? I haven't decided, mainly because I think it's mostly irrelevant. That being said, I like Jódgeirr ("Child Spear") a lot, and even though "Jóð" is the whole root rather than "Jó," I still think it can work, primarily because:

1. It's Old Norse with no modern equivalent
2. The name meaning can kind of fit into the potential headcanon I have about how Jóhannes came into existence to begin with
3. Even though the root is Jóð, it still contains the Jó element, and some of the things I've read hinted this still works. And given that a lot of Norse culture isn't 100% known I'm playing the "we honestly just don't know" card and claiming that it's possible for him to be Jódgeirr and called Jói, unless I am proven otherwise by future information.

The Days of Scorpion Fire

Tino wakes up late and alone to the muffled sounds of Halvard's voice making its way through the wall. An odd thing, for usually Halvard reserves his yelling. Through Tino's sleepiness he can make out "Hen... Ge... p!" but he still has no clue as to what he's hearing. He rubs his eyes and smacks his cheeks once before standing up to curiously investigate.

Halvard is sitting atop Henrik, hitting the notorious heavy sleeper's head with a pillow while also smacking him square in the chest with a flat palm. Henrik is still snoring, Halvard is cursing.

"Henrik. If you don't get up right now I'm going to get Hana to lick your nipples," Halvard threatens, "And that's a promise."

"No..." Henrik grumbles, trying to turn over, but to no avail as Halvard's legs have successfully pinned him in place.

It's comedy at its finest. Tino leans against the doorframe just to listen to Halvard come up with more creative threats, ranging from gluing rash-inducing plants all over Henrik's body to proposing a law that would ban all Danes from entering his country. None of these work. Halvard calls out for the small white dog while trying to tickle Henrik into waking.

Tino decides to leave them be and get a cup of coffee.

Nils and Peter, to his surprise, aren't around, and neither is Berwald. Nor is Jóhannes. So he eats breakfast from the leftovers that remain at the table and props his head up with an arm. Eventually, Henrik enters—in a morning haze—followed by Halvard, who doesn't seem to know what to do with himself as he stands in the middle of the room without moving. Henrik on the other hand, like Tino, dives into coffee first thing.

"Where is everyone, Halle?" Tino asks.

"Berwald took the kids on walk in the woods. Said he was going to teach them about the local nature."

"And Jóhannes?"

"... Don't know."

"Is he talking to you again?"

No answer. Henrik sits down next to Tino and smiles. Halvard doesn't move. Tino's not sure if he's even blinking. After a few minutes, without a word, Halvard leaves, out the door and into the woods.

"Is he mad?" Tino asks Henrik.

"I don't think he's mad. He's upset and not really sure how to express it. You know how he is, sometimes he seems angry but he's really just sad. I'll ask if I can do anything for him later, but he's irritated at me right now and I can tell he wants space."

“I hope everything works out. It's a little tense when the two of them are in the same room.”

“I'm pretty sure Jóhannes is mostly over it, but just like Halle, he has problems expressing how he feels and he over-questions how he should be behaving. It'll work out, but we shouldn't force it until they're both ready to. How are you doing though? I haven't really had the chance to chat yet!”

“Things have been good,” Tino takes a long drink to wash down his food. “As good as they reasonably could be. Gosh, I don't know what else more to say! It hasn't been *that* long since we last talked and I don't think I've done anything of note. I'm thinking about taking up a new hobby, but I don't know what? Berwald suggested gardening but that's not really my style.”

“Air guitar. Enter the air guitar championships. It'd give you something to do on long flights, although shredding it on a plane might be a little bothersome to your seat-mate if you aren't careful. You could probably pull it off though, you're a charming guy!”

“That could be fun!”

They both laugh and take another long drink. Henrik offers to fill both their mugs again and does so, but before they start their second cup, they clink their mugs together.

“If there's a doubles category at the contest, I'm making you my partner. I feel you'd be good at the whole air guitar thing too.”

“That's the sweetest thing! You're so sweet, buddy. I'm up for it. God, we need to hang out more often.”

“I agree! I enjoy everyone's company a lot, but it's always great to interact one on one, y'know? Not just with you, though. I feel that way about everyone here.”

“We're family,” Henrik exhales, almost proudly. “A messed up family, sure. We've hurt each other a lot, we're terribly dysfunctional, with a lot of complicated relationships, but we're good to each other. We care about each other. I think that's why we're all still friends and able to get together like this after everything that's happened. And that's why I think Jói and Halle will make up, and maybe their relationship will improve too.”

As if on cue, the younger of the two siblings opens the door and comes inside, unlacing his thick, heavy boots. He looks up while undoing the second one.

“What do you want. Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Nothin'. We're just enjoying your pretty face.”

“Your hair looks nice today.”

“Thanks, I didn't wash it,” Jóhannes scowls, pulling his foot free.

“Where were you?”

“Does it matter? I came back, didn't I? I'm taking a nap. If Mr. Puffin wants in, let him.”

“Where is he?”

“Doing bird stuff? Like a normal bird? I don't know genius, you tell me.”

He dashes out of the kitchen before there are any more questions.

Berwald, Nils, and Peter have enjoyed their morning outing thus far. The towering man had given the two children notebooks to write what they saw in—something that Nils in particular found boring at first—but he quickly became interested as a rivalry developed between him and Peter over who had the longer list. Berwald was pulled in two directions, with his kids excitedly asking what a certain mushroom was called or what kind of tree was above their heads. But things have settled down, the competition has petered out into embers, and the sun is shining bright on this beautiful day.

Suddenly, an animal crosses their path. Berwald quietly tells them the species name. Skogshare, in Swedish. Mountain hare, in English. *Lepus timidus*, if you wanted to be specific. *Lepus* meaning hare, *timidus* meaning timid.

The hare only stays for just enough time for the boys to get a good glance at it before it dashes off into the underbrush. As Peter and Nils update their lists, Berwald thinks.

He's lucky, he's really is, that he has the opportunity to do this, that he can teach his sons about the world. This knowledge won't be as vital for his children, for there's no need for the modern society that they're apart of to hunt and forage for survival. Today, they can look up all the information that Berwald knows on the internet or in books. But the personal connection between people, that intimate act of sharing information, is one that cannot be replicated by technology itself. Improved, maybe, by the rise of telecommunications—as Berwald can text them goodnight even if he's on the other side of the world—but not replaced.

Language changes, too. The language Berwald grew up learning no longer exists, evolving into the modern Swedish he speaks today. On occasion, he catches Halvard lapsing into old tongues and dialects that haven't been spoken by man for centuries. In comparison, in front of him are two children—one a native Swedish speaker, the other English—who are conversing in a pidgin of the two with the Finnish they've picked up from their other parent thrown in.

Maybe this is the future, right here. A place of constant flux, of greater adaption, acceptance, and balance greater than the world has ever seen before. Not a place of standardization as some would think, but a place of creativity, of change, and of sharing.

Berwald can hope.

Lepus, the hare, is also a constellation in the sky, forever running from Orion's dogs. Orion itself is another constellation, named after a great huntsman who wanted nothing more than to slay all the beasts of the earth. *Lepus* flees with the dogs nipping at its heels as the prideful Orion chases it across the night, bow held high. But Orion, too, is pursued by a monstrous scorpion with a blazing heart, the same being that killed him in on the mortal plane. They are destined to hunt each other, in circles, but never coming together as they occupy different sides of the sky.

Berwald will teach his children this tonight. The stars might not be very visible in the white night, but he'll pull out a star chart and explain that only in summer is Scorpius visible. If one wants to find Orion here, they'd have to wait until winter before the tall man and his dogs come running over the horizon.

There's a faint rustle—nearly silent, but not quite—up ahead, and out of a dense section of leaves slips Halvard. He tries to walk forward—off the traveled path and back into a wall of green—but a bush has decided to snag him by the shirt in multiple places. He sighs, using his nimble fingers to untangle himself, but he's already caught the kids' attention, who run up to him and bark out their findings, opening both of their notebooks and listing off the things they have seen.

Uncle Halvard, as he's affectionately called (Halvard insists they both call him by his full name rather than the pet form), momentarily looks incredibly weary at the sudden excitement, but he listens, and his interest is piqued.

“Would you like to see something cool?” he asks, to a resounding yes. Back into the trees he goes, returning a few minutes later with a long stick held sideways and a snake wrapped around the other end. A grass snake. *Natrix natrix*. He hushes them as Peter yells upon seeing the animal.

“The snake won't harm you,” Halvard explains, setting the stick down on the ground gently, “Unless you're foolish enough to provoke it. Older societies respected snakes, as should you. They shed their skins, which lead some people to believe they never died by natural means.”

Another constellation in the mythos: the serpent-bearer Ophiuchus, who keeps Scorpius away from Orion and was said to have learned how to cheat death by watching snakes. He was punished for obtaining eternal life, but was honored for his skill at healing.

“If my body dies, I will come back in a new one. I will be the same person, but fresh at the same time. Snakes aren't immortal like us, but we're similar.”

The four of them watch as it slithers away.

“There are other ways to 'die' other than being killed, as silly as that may sound,” Halvard whispers to himself. “And we shed off the old selves that have died before us in much the same way as a serpent does.”

“Uncle Halvard, what do you mean?”

There's no reply, because Halvard quickly dashes off into the woods again. The time of their intersecting crossroads is over and trying to track down Halvard now would prove futile.

Nils makes a comment about him being weird, and Peter agrees. They both decide to write him down in their journals as a discovery in addition to the snake. This makes Berwald chuckle.

Everyone is always running from something. Be that something a someone, deep rooted fears, or past memories that try to drag you down. But everyone also pursues, too. Be it a dream, a concept, or even just the act of living. We're all on tracks of progress, simply intersecting with others on theirs momentarily. The truth is that we won't reach all the things we pursue during our lives.

Like Ophiuchus, who chases Scorpius who chases Orion who chases Lepus along with his dogs who flees towards Ophiuchus, forming a great big mystical path across the stars. We are all great hunters, but even the most apex of predators can be hunted too. Our dreams are often too big for us or are disrupted by nightmares, but being alive is to struggle in the face of the impossible, to claw ourselves out of the mud and into greener pastures. Like Orion, we raise our bows to slay what is seemingly foolish. But even the most mighty have to hide half the year away, blockaded by reality, during the days of scorpion fire.

But man is not made of myths.

Berwald and Henrik were once locked into what seemed to be eternal combat, but they need no snake-charmer to divide them now. Berwald may have pursued Tino first, the other man just out of reach, but there have been times Tino pointed his rifle at Berwald's soft heart and dared him to stand his ground. The sky may turn in one direction and myths stay stagnant, but relationships don't.

Peter and Nils mention they are hungry. It is almost lunch time, the sun is hot, and their water bottles are empty. It is time to head home, and from their current location, if they barrel forward without thought, they will reach their destination. A race, Peter proposes, and before Berwald can tell them they should stick together, his children are laughing far ahead of him.

And so Orion marches onward, chasing after his hunting companions, deep down the rabbit hole.

Jóhannes' Untitled Poem No. 1

So, cover your soul in sticky notes to your heart's content
But remember that they don't have to stay.

When the wind blows and they flutter like leaves
Perhaps one will feel loose

Do not feel guilty if you let it go
No residue is left behind
And those who claim to see the glue
Are wrong

The words you attribute to yourself are like phone apps
Some, you'll use your whole life
Others, into the recycle bin they go after three years

The Eternal Student

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[November, 2009]

All nations live double lives.

The separation between their identities as the collective representative of a people and their personal identities isn't a distinct line and it's difficult to try and surgically separate the two into distinct parts.

Is Eduard's love of music his own or is it the result of collective Estonian values? If Eduard wasn't Estonian, would music toy with his heart in the same way? These are questions worth thinking about but not ones that have a direct answer.

In his sterile office in Tallinn there is no name plaque or sign that defines who he is and what his role is. He introduces himself as Eduard to most, but there are some that knock on his door and call out "Eesti" to get his attention. The answers to "what does Eduard think" and "what does Estonia think" can sometimes vary and seemingly contradict, but both are statements of truth. He is Eduard as much as he is Estonia—sometimes one first-most over the other—but always both.

He lives the life of a citizen, paying taxes, budgeting his earned paycheck, and frowning at inconveniences that impact his daily life. His ID indicates him as a person who just so happened to be born on the day of Estonia's independence.

But this is falsified, as is much of his identity.

Nations have the greatest ability to compartmentalize their feelings and viewpoints. In international conferences, near fistfights break out over national policy, but minutes later during lunch, the two who were at each other's throats before are discussing the state of their personal gardens and trading bulbs they've kept in their pockets for each other while giggling.

There are times that Eduard has to ask to his friends: "Do you feel this way about me as a person or is this about me as a nation?"

The response isn't always clear, but that's just the way it is.

In a way, there are several Eduards. There is Eduard, who is Estonia. Then, there is Eduard, the Estonian who dances around his kitchen while watering his plants to a song on his computer. There is the Eduard who comes across to others as cool and suave and the Eduard who trips over his feet and lands face-first into a snowbank. There is an Eduard who is polite and kind, and an Eduard who is nasty and mean. There's a part of Eduard who is fearless and carefree and a part of him that is frightful and anxiety-ridden.

But there is an Eduard who goes to school in Tallinn who deserves some particular attention.

As busy as he is, Eduard is a person who enrolls himself in school. He has special arrangements with professors that understand that due to unknown circumstances of his personal life, he

sometimes has to travel and be absent from lecture. He's a diligent student, which is why he's granted this privilege, but he still agonizes over his grades and won't answer personal messages during the exam crunch.

He has to go under different names, attend different schools, pin his hair back and wear contacts, just so nobody catches on that Eduard has been a student on and off for decades upon decades.

Sometimes it's hard not to smile when they bring up old research and staff that he assisted personally. Ah, that's when I was Kaido, when I was Lauri, Jüri, Tovia. When I was a literature student, a mechanical engineer, an economics major, in psychology.

Some nations refuse to fraternize with their people, with it being too difficult or too heartbreaking to have mortal friends. There are things that people just don't understand, and while there's no ban on telling people about their immortality, it's not worth it most of the time. It's easier to put on the disguise of simply being human and come up with excuses and justifications for their knowledge, abilities, and actions.

Eduard likes to interact with his classmates, and while he changes majors often or “drops out” to prevent people from finding out twenty years later that the cute boy from all those calculus classes looks no different, he makes temporary friends.

He has a ring that often sit around his middle finger, but he slides it onto his ring finger when he's out in public for long periods of time. It prevents people from pursuing him. If somebody asks him out he can apologize, point to it, and insist he's married already. A lie, but it works, and he doesn't have to explain much else. “I only go to school part time because I have an internship with the local government,” he'll say, or “Sorry, I can't study tonight, I don't feel well,” when he's really on his way to Germany to discuss trade agreements with Ludwig. Occasionally when his cover is blown, he pretends they are strangers and says “I don't know you.”

Lies, lies, little white lies. They make life easier.

Tonight, he's laughing while walking down the street with a few people from university that know him as Koit. Something about the darkness of this night makes everything funnier, even if the jokes and puns being flung around aren't that clever. Eduard is practically crying, his sides ache, and he has to rest against a building to steady himself under the light of a street lamp.

As he regains control of his breath, he breathes deeper, and his dizzying thoughts focus on his last class of the day. An exchange between two students during a discussion about the human body kept repeating in his head.

“And in fact, just by inhaling, your body traps some of the microbes that exist in the air and your body then proceeds to kill them.”

“You could say, then, that every breath is an extinction.”

A sober lull.

Four months ago Eduard had been driving to Tartu and accidentally hit a barn swallow with his car. He had gotten out of it to locate the bird—there was some part of him that wished it to be safe—and several meters back, he found the crumpled body on the road. It looked like a shooting star, with blood streaking the ground between its forked tail feathers. He didn't know what he expected, exactly.

To leave one of the symbols of his country dead on the pavement seemed heartless to him as a nation.

To leave his favorite species of bird grounded unceremoniously seemed cruel to him as a person.

To leave a former life alone without a moment of thought seemed unfair to him as a killer.

He laid the body off the side of the road next to some wildflowers and continued on his way.

“It's not so much, you must kill in order to live. But rather, in order to exist, we borrow life from others. Even plants, who make their own food, compete with each other for sunshine and drain nutrients out of the soil.”

“It isn't okay to hurt people, but it is impossible to go through life without harming, and we must be aware of this.”

All nations who have lived more than a few decades know this.

Most humans do too even if they don't want to admit it.

“I think it's more important to think about it this way; there is a finite amount of life in this world. It is impossible to infinitely exist, the world does not allow for immortality, and life does not grow exponentially as a whole. If there are too many wolves, rabbits will disappear, and without the rabbits, the wolves will die. It's basic population studies—the earth cannot support every single individual of every single species to an infinite end.”

“It's not so much killing. I think killing implies that living is inherently wrong and it isn't. We are borrowing life, and we will return it. Nobody thinks about borrowing a library book and how that might effect another person who wanted that same book but now cannot have it. But eventually, you'll bring it back, and others will have the chance to read it. It's a similar concept, and it's not grim at all.”

“I think what Liis said has some truth. Every breath you take is an extinction. But those deaths become a part of you, your body breaks them down and builds something new. Perhaps by adopting a cat or by leaving crumbs on the ground as you eat, a creature can find the means to get by another day. Sure, you take opportunities away from others, but you give back even if you don't realize it.”

“You are a nursery just as much as you are a graveyard. Cherish yourself because of that.”

Eduard wondered to himself if it was selfish for nations to exist.

And he's still thinking about it, on the street, rubbing his fingers together for warmth. He's fallen behind, his friends are up the road, and he hears his classmate Liis call out to him. She's smiling, waving her hand, telling him to catch up with the rest of them.

If she's lucky, it will be seventy years before she's gone, and even though Eduard will have stopped talking to her long before then, he thinks he'll keep tabs on her and pay his respects at her funeral.

But that is provided that he's lucky, too.

He runs up to them, and even though he is different from the other students, he doesn't feel that way. They walk down a street that had once been farmland in Eduard's memory, singing songs together while laughing, and celebrate the good things in life with their precious breath.

Maybe it was selfish, but it was still okay.

Chapter End Notes

-This is more of an aside rather than a note, but Estonian ID cards are really high tech, they're interesting to read about!

-In the first Hetalia episode, Estonia is depicted wearing a ring on his middle finger, which I always thought was interesting, and the resulting headcanon I have is that he uses it as a way to deter romantic advances from humans.

Fashion Styles Come and Go but Ironic Sweaters are Forever

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jóhannes is a late sleeper. He prefers to go to bed late and get up at noon. Tino tells him it's because of his physical age being what it is, but Jóhannes disagrees. It's not a matter of his age. He just likes the night time, where it's quiet and he can think without interruption. In truth, it's probably a bit of both.

He stumbles out of bed in boxer shorts and an oversized black shirt that once belonged to Henrik, rubbing a hand through his messy hair while listening to the rain pitter patter on the rooftop above his head. He opens his mouth to yawn. Thunder booms.

“Morning, or rather, afternoon!”

He's greeted with a barrage of these comments as he enters the main living space. He has a feeling that he is not the only late waker this morning—nobody is properly dressed. Henrik and Berwald are leaning across the table from each other, comparing their unshaven faces with a gleam of competition in their eyes. Nils and Peter are seated next to Henrik, huddled close around a DS screen and trying to figure out a puzzle together in their brightly patterned pajamas. As for the remaining Finn, he is on the ground playing with his dog, trying to teach her a new trick.

Jóhannes gets himself a cup of coffee, and while he's waiting for his mug to fill, Berwald comes up behind him and asks if he'll assist him in making breakfast. From the table, Peter says he wants pancakes, which causes Henrik to start chanting “pannkakor” over and over, banging his fists on the table. Nils, who secretly admires Henrik in many ways, quickly copies his uncle. The two of them raise their voices, Peter joining in, and when Berwald nods, the three celebrate, erupting in cheers.

“Don't you want anything else other than that?” Tino asks them, dog laying flatly on his chest.

The pannkakor squad starts chanting again.

“Nothin' but pannkakor,” Berwald sighs, shaking his head.

But it is vacation.

Jóhannes locates the proper measuring cups, even though both of them know how to make the batter using only rudimentary measurements. Berwald brings up that when he was young, fistfuls were proper forms of measurement, and Jóhannes admits that when he cooks for himself he'll often cheat and just guess. While Jóhannes is cracking eggs into a bowl, his puffin decides to jump down from atop a cabinet (where he had decided to roost) and land on his head, ruffling feathers after regaining balance and sitting.

“Gosh,” he mutters, shooing the bird off. “I know my hair must look like a bird's nest, but that doesn't mean it has to *be* one.”

Berwald chuckles. The conversation between the two is low and hushed in comparison to the rowdy trio at the table, all now heavily invested in Peter's game. There's really no need for

Jóhannes to continue helping, but he leans against the counter and watches Berwald as he cooks. Berwald is easy to talk to, a good impartial figure that Jóhannes feels treats him as an equal while also being a mentor of sorts. And to Berwald, Jóhannes is a thoughtful person, a worthy debate partner, and a treasured friend. There's a part of Berwald that secretly considers Jóhannes to be his third son in a way, but the likelihood of him confessing that is low. The white haired boy has more than enough problems with the two eccentric parents he already has.

“I know ya ain't looking for him, but Halle's outside right now,” Berwald whispers to him after spending several minutes deciding on whether or not to bring up Halvard. “I don't think he's comin' inside anytime soon, though.”

“He's outside now? In this weather? What on earth is he doing?”

“Reading.”

“Reading?!”

“Ya can see him if you peep out that window there.”

Outside, there is a reclining lawn chair. On it, is Halvard, resting lazily, with a book in his hands. He's completely drenched, water dripping from his nose and eyelashes onto the pages he's squinting at. Thunder booms, rolling across the sky slowly, and Halvard looks up into the heavens briefly. His skin looks paler, like a statue, his body soaked to the bone and his waterlogged hair clinging closely to his scalp. The only thing that makes him look remotely alive is his slow blinking, fingers turning the book's pages carefully, and the visible heave of his chest as he exhales.

Statues, however, do not usually wear twenty year old jeans and a sweater sporting a cartoonish-looking sun with “it's always sunny in my mind!” written across the front. Both articles of clothing have seen better days. They are full of holes and the colors have faded dramatically over the years, but Halvard is the kind of person to wear clothes he likes until they are nothing more than bare threads.

“How is he able to read like that?”

“Book's waterproof. Ya missed it last night, but Halle was readin' it on the couch, an' he got up and was whispering to himself an awful lot and left while Henrik and I talked. Tino was showerin', Halvard just let himself in and tested it to see if it actually was.”

“Scared the crap out of me, honestly,” Tino exasperates, still lying on the floor. “Imagine you are washing your armpit and all of a sudden Halle's there, throwing a book at you, and then just stares at it on the shower floor for a minute before picking it up and leaving! Like nothing even happened! Doesn't even say a word to you.”

Outside, Halvard shifts the book over to one hand to reach for the coffee mug resting on the ground next to him. The chipped mug has overflowed, catching rain in the basin, leaving the coffee diluted and cold, but Halvard takes a sip out of it anyway, flinching as fat droplets plummet into the liquid and spray in his face. A grimace, as the diluted substance isn't very good, but he takes another one before nestling the cup back into the grass.

“Are you just going to let him be out there?” Jóhannes asks.

“He can do whatever he wants,” Berwald pours batter into the pan, “as long as he doesn't track

water inside and cause a mess. But honestly, I don't think he'll come in until the storm is over or he finishes the book, whichever comes first. The apocalypse could be happenin', right now, and even then I don't think he'd move from that spot. He's havin' a good time. As are we. Thank ya for helping me, but you should eat.”

Jóhannes obeys, nodding and heading towards the table. As he approaches Henrik looks at him helplessly.

“Jói,” he laments, a tad overdramatic. “I have no idea what I'm doing in this game. We're all stuck, please help.”

“Yeah, Peter has no idea what he's doing.”

“You don't either Nils!”

They hand him the device after he sits down. Within a minute, Jóhannes proudly states that he's figured out how to do it, handing the game back to three very impressed faces who shower him with praise. He blushes red, but stays at the table, explaining that it wasn't that hard and the only reason why he knew what to do was because he owns the game himself. It's nothing special, he insists over and over again, but Henrik says something to him in passing that he'll think about for months to come.

“Jóhannes, you may feel like it's nothing, but don't downplay your own accomplishments and skills. Don't ignore yourself like that.”

It may be over a game, but he treasures those words.

He'll tuck them in between the folds of the hand-me-down clothes he owns and it'll help him stay warm through the long, dark winter ahead of him.

Chapter End Notes

- Pannkakor are Swedish pancakes.

- The book that Halvard is reading is called *Cradle to Cradle* by Michael Braungart and William McDonough, a book that I read for a literature/philosophy class. It is indeed 100% waterproof. I had never tested it when I first read it (although my classmates confirmed it was true) but tried it for myself recently to see if this was something possible to write about (since I have had the image of Halvard reading in the rain in my head for 4 years now but wanted to see if it was actually practical). So, I threw the book into a pool and also read a chapter outside during a thunderstorm exactly like Halvard is doing in this chapter. No harm to the book was done and looks as good as new!

- Some words about *Cradle to Cradle* as a book: I have some issues with what it argues, but I do think it contains some really interesting ideas about waste and the environment and it indirectly introduced me to a few other concepts that I was unfamiliar with but really liked.

The Three Crowns Conflict

Chapter Notes

kareli left a comment a few months ago about the idea of doing a segment about Denmark and Sweden's emblems, and I liked the idea, so credit for them for alerting me to this because I didn't know it existed until they did!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The First Crown

[The untamed northern wilderness, 650]

Do you remember, do you remember, when we were brothers?

Henrik did all the talking for Berwald when they were together, acting as the diplomat between Berwald's shyness and the rest of the known world. It wasn't a matter of "he and I" but a matter of "we." We're hungry, we'd like to learn how to tie knots, we're tired now. Henrik's assumptions were sometimes misguided, and Berwald would have to tug on his tunic and shake his head, he couldn't blame Henrik for his mistakes. All he was doing was trying to include him and keep him happy.

"Do you want some?" Henrik would offer, already breaking off pieces to share with those around him. He insisted, handing over the larger half without batting an eyelash. They were starving, but to Henrik, as a natural born leader, the priority was always those around him. "Take it," he demanded, handing the two halves of his heart to Halvard and Berwald as if it were nothing.

Berwald and Henrik crossed shallow creeks together, hand in hand, even though neither of them needed the touch. They shared their first hunts together, they poured their feelings out to each other, and it was with Henrik's support and assurance that Berwald grew in confidence.

"Let me get that for you," Henrik said, reaching up on his tiptoes to grab fruit from the tree above. But Berwald was taller than him now and could reach the branches that Henrik struggled to touch.

"Let me help you," Henrik continued to say, even though Berwald had long outgrown the need.

They'd sit on grassy hillsides, the wind always blowing, and talk about the petty secrets they hid from everyone else. Berwald first learned he had a knack for crafting wood during one of their sharing-sessions, listening to Henrik list off his wants for the future.

"I'd like the future to be a better place," and Berwald picks up a piece of wood.

"I'd like to become strong so that I can do what I'd like," and Berwald takes a sharp knife to etch designs that parallel the tree's natural lines.

"I'd like to be a ruler so that I can do what I think is best," and Berwald can barely hear him whisper over the sound of grinding sawdust.

Berwald carves horses and Henrik grows more interested in power with each passing century.

The Second Crown

[It doesn't matter where (for the story would be the same regardless), 1434]

Do you remember, do you remember, when I killed you?

The same knife—now dull and weathered—that Berwald used for carving plunges deep into Henrik's side, as hard as Berwald's white-knuckled fist can push it. He twists it, but loses his grip on the blade. He hears something crack as Henrik swings a fist into his chest and they both spend a moment consumed by pain.

They grew up playing with each other, learning how to fight alongside each other, so it's only natural that in their early adulthood would they spend time smearing each other's blood across their faces.

At first, it was nothing more than a series of tests. When immortality seems secure, there's a certain amount of curiosity and recklessness. How far can we push our bodies? There's no need to hold back in combat when the earth will recycle your blood and bones with the same consistency as clockwork. It was all in good fun, it all had a purpose, and if somebody died, it was unfortunate but inconsequential. Halvard accidentally killed Henrik once and his main concern was who would help him finish up the harvest season.

But things changed. Halvard insisted he was too old for such fighting despite his spry body. The effects of widespread disease in his nation made him weak and tired. He stopped, instead devoting the little energy he had just to keep himself moving so his joints wouldn't freeze up.

Berwald and Henrik didn't.

They swing at each other again. Blood runs out of Henrik's nose and the scrapes across Berwald's scalp are dyeing his hair red.

Their nations, their people, their ideals as individuals, all of it clashed now. They could barely look at each other without wanting to punch each other's lights out. A stray comment is a spark into the bonfire that has become Berwald and Henrik's relationship and this summer is so dry.

Berwald sinks his teeth into Henrik's arm, Henrik retaliates with his nails.

They both only want the best for each other and themselves but they fundamentally disagree as to what “the best” is.

And so it comes to this, with Henrik slamming Berwald's body down and cracking the table the Swede crafted in two. There's old blood from the last time they fought, faded like soup stains on the walls. These are two people, fueled by wrath, rage, and their own ideas of what rule should be. Once inseparable, they now avoid each other at all costs. But this house is smaller on the inside, this kingdom only a fraction of the known world, and by the duties that bind them, there's no way out.

They are like sharks, circling in a fishbowl.

In fifteen minutes they've done each other in. They've exhausted their own life, dying face to face,

they're still snarling. But in that moment, close to death, there's a moment of apology, and Henrik starts crying as Berwald tries to reach out to gently touch the beaten face of the brother he hasn't been able to hold for a long time now.

There will be momentary peace, they'll keep it together in meetings and avoid each other as much as possible, but the dying embers will rekindle and they'll swear by the stars that their hatred for each other will never die.

Young gods and the ideals they live by are so foolish.

The Third Crown

[Sweden, then Denmark, then Sweden again, 1550]

Do you remember, do you remember, when you said I went too far?

Abandoned is the word that Henrik would use to describe how he felt after Berwald left the union. Not a winded explanation, no frivolous words, not a series of exclamations. Just abandoned, and that he adopted all of the orphaned feelings that Berwald left behind.

And Berwald? He'd say something along the lines that he gained freedom, felt happy for the first time in ages after leaving the flat lands of Denmark for greener pastures across the Öresund straights. He could go on and on about how leaving the Kalmar Union made him feel, having so much to say and not enough breath to condense it into a single breath.

They still saw each other in passing, even though they had effectively split ways. They clamped their jaws shut so that they wouldn't speak flames and burn each other anymore. Halvard and Tino did the exchanging of greetings between their silent kings, being vectors that ran parallel but never crossed. With a slight of palm and a well-timed whisper, "please have this" and "I made this for you," they'd link hands underneath the table, sharing tokens and comforting palm strokes.

Was the little wooden horse that Halvard received a gift from Tino or Berwald? Was Halvard the recipient, or was it Henrik? Tino asked the same questions, turning a good luck charm over in his hands on the trip back home.

They never specified, which made it impossible to tell, but also easier to stomach—the horse on Halvard's desk but in Henrik's house and the charm in a box of Tino's that Berwald crafted.

And then conflict arises again, over the three crowns that Denmark adds to their royal emblem. Three familiar crowns that Sweden has treasured for much longer.

Berwald is ready to tear Henrik to shreds. How dare his country. How dare he. How dare they claim that as their own. It's a theft, a betrayal, a sign of attempted conquer. Maybe it's brutish and unwise, sneaking out of the room while diplomats discuss this and rushing straight for Henrik's office instead, but Berwald doesn't care. He's expecting a fight, he doesn't trust this to end peacefully, as none of their conflicts of the past several decades have ever been settled this way.

There's a snowstorm worth of words he wants to barrage Henrik with, so many questions and demands and answers, but he just yells why after slamming the door open and cornering Henrik as he sits at his desk.

“Why wouldja do this?!”

It takes a moment for Henrik to compose himself, a raised quill dripping ink messily down upon the document he had been writing.

“I had nothing to do with it.”

“But surely ya knew!”

“Well. Yeah.” Henrik swallows hard, rising from his seat. “But. I don't think it's a bad idea. We only want to remember, Berwald.”

“Remember what?” Berwald glares and his voice lowers, growling. “Remember how ya royally *fucked* us all over? How ya didn't listen, how ya didn't consider how we felt, how ya did everything on your own?!”

“It's not all my fault and you know that!”

“But it *IS*! Just because you think everythin' ya did was with the best intentions, that doesn't make it right, Henrik!”

“So this isn't about the crowns? Why the hell are you here then!?”

“To make ya let go of this idea that we'll all be happy if we're all together! That we can ever possibly get along! Just cause we did as kids, just because we promised to always be together, that doesn't mean things have to stay that way. It isn't realistic, you've changed, *I've* changed! I don't need yer help anymore, I don't needja anymore. And ya don't need me, Henrik. If you keep clingin' to this rotting idea you're just gonna rot yerself.”

“What does this have to with the crowns though?!”

“It's a symbol of *my* country, not Denmark! It's like yer preemptively telling me to come back!”

“I don't *want* you to come back! Just. Do whatever the hell you want, Berwald! I don't give a shit anymore. You're more trouble than you're worth to keep around and you don't *fucking* listen! You haven't really, truly listened to me for *years*. And yeah, maybe I haven't been listening either, but I'm not about to start listening to you now, cause you clearly don't get what I'm talking about. The crowns are staying.”

“Yeah, yer right, *I don't get it!* I want to get it, but I don't understand why yer trying so hard to cling yourself to splintered driftwood!”

“I just *miss* you Berwald, that's all!” Henrik wails, crying and halfheartedly punching Berwald in the chest. “Is that such an unforgivable crime?! To *miss* you?”

The hairs on Berwald's neck are raised straight up, but he allows Henrik to weep and hit him with weightless fists, because deep down, he misses the Henrik he once knew too.

“Just go!” Henrik screams, grabbing him by the shoulders and shoving him backwards, sparks starting to fly between them. “*GET OUT!*”

And Henrik chases Berwald out of the building and out of Denmark for good.

The Resolution

[A certain bridge, the morning of the first of July, 2000]

Do you remember, do you remember, when we found peace?

He should've expected that he would've gotten to their meeting point first, greeted only by fresh concrete and a mellow sky. He set out earlier, part of him wanting to be there first—there was a flare of rivalry that existed between them—and Berwald supposed that Henrik would be too astounded by his own creation and marvel at the cool metal of his tunnel under the sea. He could practically hear Henrik's voice ringing in his ears, the loud gasps and childish fawning echoing off the walls. No one would hear him deep down there, but that never stopped Henrik from talking to himself before.

Berwald sits on the median barriers, taking several deep breaths of early morning air. Later in the day, there will be vehicles whizzing by once the official ceremony opened the Öresund Bridge for public travel. But for now, there's none of that. Just a vast sky, the texture of concrete, and the faint smell of the sea.

As always, Berwald hears Henrik before he sees him, clunky footsteps from heavy boots echoing out of the dark tunnel. He's nothing but a shadow and then he's there, all at once. He waves. Berwald nods and points to the opposing bench of concrete on Henrik's side of the bridge.

A lot has changed. Time, maturity, and many difficult talks have smoothed over their relationship. The tone has changed. They both feel like new people, fresh while still remembering the feeling of jabbing daggers into each other. It seems like an impossible dream to have ever imagined that they would've been able to put their differences aside and artificially connect their countries with machines and metal.

Before Henrik has a chance to open his mouth and spoil what the tunnel is like, Berwald asks him about the name of the island they sit on.

“Peberholm?”

“You like it? Cause I do,” he smiles. “I think it's really cute. Peberholm and Saltholm, together on the Baltic Sea.”

“Yeah.”

Pepper and salt are considered opposites but that doesn't mean they can't taste good together.

“This is so exciting, though! I'm really excited to drive across it all the time, it seems so fun and it's going to be so easy to visit! I'm going to visit you all the time!”

“Just don't ya show up unannounced.”

“You know that you sayin' that isn't gonna stop me and I'm just going to do it anyway.”

“Ya gotta at least let me try.”

“Yeah,” and Henrik shifts to hand Berwald an unevenly wrapped present with a lopsided bow. “But it's not going to work.”

“Ya still can't wrap stuff right.”

“You just can't appreciate my ingenuity.”

“If that's what yer gonna call it,” and Berwald hands him a similar sized package but geometrically, perfectly composed. “Ya can open it now, but only if ya open it carefully.”

Henrik immediately pulls the bow off and sticks it to his forehead, and while he uses his fingernails to tear away at paper and tape, Berwald takes the bow off of his and slaps it on Henrik's shoulder.

“I'm a gift, even to myself,” Henrik boasts, sliding the box out of the wrappings and opening it.

A brilliantly colored Dala horse, the same red as Denmark's flag, with flourishes of paint that are familiar. Turning it over, on the belly, in careful, tiny cursive paint:

In celebration of the completion of the Öresund Bridge

To Henrik, from Berwald

May this last

“My only complaint is that it's Øresund, otherwise this is beautiful. Thank you.”

“If 'm writing in Swedish, why would I spell it in Danish, silly? You're welcome.”

And Henrik's gift to Berwald? A new set of carving tools, to replace the ones he ruined along ago.

“It's been nice working with you.”

Henrik reaches across the median between them to shake hands.

“Mm. Likewise.”

An agreement, midway.

They continue onward, Berwald under the earth towards Denmark and Henrik passing over water into Sweden.

Chapter End Notes

– Norway was infected by the plague in 1349. Accounts vary wildly, but most estimate somewhere between 20% to 60% of the population died and is said to have weakened Norway as a country significantly.

– The Three Crowns Conflict was a political conflict between Sweden and Denmark. The three crowns is a symbol of Sweden (or as at least traditionally associated with it), and so when the Danish king added three crowns to the royal coat of arms, the Swedish government interpreted that Danish desire to re-take Sweden and force Sweden back into union with Denmark and Norway. Today, both countries use the

triple crowns in their emblems, but it's less prominent in Denmark's and officially said to be a “reminder” of the Kalmar Union.

– The Øresund Bridge is comprised of an underwater tunnel and a bridge connecting Denmark and Sweden together. Peberholm is the name of the artificial island where the tunnel starts (or ends depending on your perspective) and Saltholm is a natural island nearby. The names translate to roughly “pepper islet” and “salt islet,” respectively named to compliment each other.

– Dala horses are traditional Swedish carved wooden horses. They're painted with really neat decorations and are typically red. I really like them a lot and feel really familiar with them because we had a few of them as decorations in our house growing up (and we still have them, I just don't know where they've gone after moving so much).

Double-Edged Razor

Tino has always been a person who hums. Old songs, new melodies, soft intonations to lessen stress or to signify pleasure—he hums a great many things.

With scissors in his hand, he's humming now, cutting Jóhannes' hair. It's been shaggy for several weeks and while Jóhannes could've easily gotten his hair cut, or even cut it carefully himself, he waited until this vacation because he knew how much Tino enjoyed himself while cutting other people's hair. On the ground, around the tree stump where Jóhannes sits, is a multicolored collection of hair. Nils and Peter were the first to go, littering red and gold in a circle. Then Henrik asked if Tino could trim up a piece of hair that had been falling in his face awkwardly. Halvard lurked while Berwald had gotten his done, not saying anything but clearly interested. When Berwald put his glasses back on and gave Tino a stoic thumbs up, Halvard quickly drew closer—Tino didn't even have a chance to finish inviting him over before he sat down, removing his hairpin quietly.

There's quite a bit of variation—Henrik's hair is a mixture of the copper red that Nils' sports and the milky blonde of Peter's. Berwald's is coarse and eternally sun bleached, like a halo around his head. Halvard's is the color of ripe wheat and curls strangely both atop his head and when cut. It's easy to pick out whose is whose.

Small snips, here and there, and ash gray finds itself atop the pile, like snowflakes on a barren desert.

“Don't tell anyone, but I love cutting your hair the most, it's always so nice and soft,” Tino sing-whispers, floofing Jóhannes' now finished hair. “Do you think you're going to grow it out again like you did a few years ago?”

“I don't know.” A pause. “Maybe. Probably not any time soon.”

“Well, it looks nice however you style it. Like a puffy cloud.”

Like the ones overhead, billowing, bloated with rain but not letting it go.

Tino keeps playing with his hair long past what is appropriate. Jóhannes doesn't move, instead he scratches his shoulder and thinks about how nice jumping straight into the lake sounds right now, running off the pier and smacking himself into the water with a bang.

“Could you cut my hair?” Tino asks.

And although Jóhannes really doesn't want to, they switch places and Jóhannes—with scissors in hand—snips cautiously.

“You know, I really think we should have a party tonight,” Tino clasps his hands together. “With ice cream—did Berwald tell you we bought ice cream?—and play board games and talk about all sorts of stuff! Maybe have an handaxe throwing contest, wouldn't that be fun? I'll try not to win, and Henrik isn't allowed to compete if he's been drinking because we don't want a repeat of *last year*.”

“Stop moving so much or else I'll cut our ear off on accident!”

“Sorry, sorry, I'm just having a good day.”

“... You don't think it's going to rain tonight?”

“I think it is, but I'm hoping it isn't. I think it would be a good night for everyone to get together. For the most part everyone is in good spirits and Berwald tells me he has the desire to set something on fire, and I think having one by the shore would be nice.”

Snip.

“Whoops.”

“What?”

“Nothing!” Jóhannes' voice is shaky and hasty. He corrects his mistake as best he can and fakes confidence. “Nothing at all. Just. Thinking about. If Henrik gets drunk, it'd be good if the fire is close to the water in case he burns himself. Could avoid another “whoops” moment. Yeah.”

“That's a good point!”

Jóhannes can't tell if Tino truly buys it or if he's just playing along to make him feel better, but he's pretty sure it's the former. He finishes up, brushing the stray hairs off of Tino's shoulders, and hands back the scissors.

They both break into the freezer together and snack on ice cream before anyone else.

Rain in Valhalla on a Wednesday

[A few months before the vacation]

Alone.

Henrik vacuums his house and bakes what he fears might not be enough cookies, doing laundry and cleaning up odds and ends as the skies above Copenhagen flood the ground with water. He pulls the curtains aside but doesn't seem to notice the turbulent storm above him, blissfully unaware of how bad the rain really is. The lights may flicker a little in his old house, but that's normal for this time of year and he's examined the wiring for himself to make sure everything is connected properly. Henrik's stubborn, rash sometimes, but he wouldn't risk an electrical fire, not when he's expecting guests.

He has difficulty sticking to one task, something that's always ailed him. He jumps from chore to chore, half-finishing one before starting on another, not remembering to set a timer for the cookies and barely saving a batch after he smells something burning. Finishing dishes—which should've only taken him ten minutes—takes him three hours to complete. It's frustrating, certainly, that his mind is this way, but he's grown accustomed to it, giving himself more time than he needs to finish reading paperwork and rerouting himself when he can. It works, his system works, and he's adapted this far.

Coffee, he needs to prepare coffee—but he also needs to get the mail, he forgot—and the winds outside are only getting worse. He puts on a raincoat, does a few tasks in the kitchen, folds half his towels, and then braves the fearsome outdoors to get what only turns out to be a bill and junk mail.

When he comes back inside, he can hear the phone ringing, and he rushes to take off his soaked clothing only to pick up the phone on the final ring.

“Hello?” he asks.

“Hey, Henrik! I'm really sorry about this, but I don't think we're coming. I accidentally shot Berwald, so we're at the hospital.”

“You *shot* Berwald?!”

“Yeah,” Tino nervously laughs. “Right though his leg.” There's a moment of silence before he lowers his voice, trying to hide from anyone who'd overhear that being shot isn't that big of a deal for people like them. “We thought about coming anyway but we didn't think we could get past airport security with all the bleeding, and I thought it'd be better if he rested instead of straining himself.” Back at his normal pitch, “So, yeah. Do you want to talk to Berwald?”

“Does he want to talk to me?”

Tino asks the question and Henrik can hear low mumbling.

“He says not really, but he wants to apologize for getting shot.”

“Well, tell him I forgive him and that he should focus on getting better.”

“He says thanks. But yeah, we’re both really sorry about this.”

“That’s okay, stuff happens.”

Henrik has to quickly tell them goodbye because he has another incoming call, this time from Halvard.

“Why is your weather so shitty.” Halvard coldly states, clearly irritated and sharper than usual. “I’m stuck in Oslo still and they just canceled my flight because of how bad the storm is.”

“Oh.”

“I’m going to try to get another flight but I’m not sure how soon that’ll be. I’ll keep you updated.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“Sorry,” Halvard apologizes, and hangs up the phone.

Three minutes later, Jóhannes frantically calls him, claiming that he’s running across Reykjavik because there’s been a governmental emergency meeting and he’s necessary staff.

“I tried to get out of it,” he pants, winded. “I can’t, they need me, I’ll come some other time, I’ve got to go, bye!”

So he’ll spend this blustery day alone and his concern about not having enough cookies is no longer an issue.

Henrik continues to set up his house as if people are coming, and makes a few phone calls to see if any of his friends are interesting in hanging out, but either people aren’t home or they’re busy.

When self-proclaimed leaders are alone, with nobody to look after and no battle to plan for, who are they? Who do they become? When there is no one to charm and no one to chat with, what is a person of Henrik’s caliber to do?

All his life, Henrik has fought against isolation—surrounding himself with people and keeping them around him—because there’s some deep part of him that fears being abandoned, left behind and let go. Perhaps he was too smothering in the past and he’s still the last person to let go during hugs. He knows that everyone doesn’t intend to leave him, and it’s selfish to want to keep people around you when they have their own lives to follow, but there’s still part of him that feels disappointed and rejected when things like this happen.

It isn’t like before—where everyone left his kingdom feeling wronged—but he still has false worry that he’s disliked, or that people still resent him being in their lives, even though he knows it’s not true and just his own insecurities bubbling up.

He finishes all of his half-completed tasks, but he’s slower, he’s not as excited. By the time he finishes he’s frowning. He takes a handful of cookies and munches on them not because he’s hungry, but because they give him something to do as he sighs in this house, empty asides from himself.

Henrik keeps himself busy by reading old magazines and wonders if anyone will miraculously be able to make it. He keeps baking cookies, just in case, but by himself he’ll never eat them fast

enough before they start going stale.

Jóhannes' Untitled Poem No. 2

revolution
is sometimes nothing more than
a quiet rebellion
against yourself
and your stagnant soul

Mercurial

Chapter Notes

Just fyi, most of these dates are essentially random and arbitrary, or are at least not super specific to any certain real-life historical events other than 1397 which is the start of the Kalmar Union.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

[Norway, 1977]

“Stop working, this is supposed to be relaxing.”

But Henrik doesn't look up from the passenger's seat to enjoy the scenery, instead frowning and turning a page over on a stapled document. He doesn't react to Halvard, who is frowning just as much, driving slightly over the speed limit and making quick glances to observe whether or not Henrik will continue working.

The plan was to take a pleasant drive through the countryside together and catch up after not seeing each other in person for a few years. Halvard rolls down the windows in hopes that the clattering wind fiddling with the pages will be annoying enough to stop Henrik from working. It's not, so Halvard tries another tactic.

“What are you working on?”

“Tax laws,” Henrik mutters, scratching his head. “They're really boring but I gotta review them before—”

“—Henrik, look at those cows!”

“Where?!”

Halvard lunges over and grabs all of Henrik's papers while he's distracted, crumpling the pages in his fists as he seizes them, and violently throwing them all out the window. They flutter behind them and disappear into the landscape as Halvard zooms away.

Henrik sticks his head out the car and watches as the white pages go.

“I was working on those!” he yells.

“I am not letting you work on vacation,” Halvard growls. “You can go back to work when you go home.”

“But—”

“Listen. I can turn the car around right now and take you back to Denmark. Hell, if you want to go pick up your precious papers, I can let you out right here and you can walk back, I could care less.

But I was under the assumption that you wanted to talk with me and chill out, not continue to torture yourself.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.”

“Someone needs to set you straight sometimes. Just wish it didn’t always have to be me.”

“It isn’t always you.”

“Sure feels like it sometimes.”

“Maybe, like, seventy percent of the time,” Henrik fumbles with his work bag and snaps the clasps of it shut, sighing.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“Nothing really. Just, try and catch up, you know? What have you been up to?”

“I have a new hobby.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve taken an interest in insects and have been documenting the ones I see around my house. Keeping a list of what I’ve seen, checking out books about bugs from the library to read, all that good stuff.” Halvard rolls up the windows so he can hear better. “It’s something to do, at least, to keep myself occupied.”

“Insects, huh?”

“What?”

“It’s just not what I was expecting. I guess I thought you were going to say you took an interest in scrapbooking, or baking, or started entering chess tournaments like you said you would last time we talked. But you do like to be outside, you’re good at noticing little things, and you like creepy stuff, so it makes sense.”

“Baking…” Halvard sucks on his tongue, thinking as he signals left. “I have considered it.”

“You bake well,” Henrik laughs. “If I hafta be honest, I’ve missed your baking a lot over the years.”

“I’ll have to bake you a cake then, huh?”

“Please do, the sooner the better. I’m starving for it.”

“Maybe I’ll bake it in the shape of an insect.”

“Weird, but okay!”

“Beetle-shaped cake.” Halvard continues to muse to himself, smiling ever so slightly and whispering aloud but so quietly that Henrik can barely hear him even when he leans in closer.

Overlooking the fjords, Halvard names off the butterflies that float past them, but since he doesn't directly point them out Henrik only vaguely understands which name belongs to which. And really, it doesn't matter anyway, as the local names change with dialect and have frayed with time, the scientific ones morphing and changing just as a caterpillar goes through metamorphosis. As understanding changes, so do the words we describe our world with. Halvard knows this knowledge may only be temporary, as Norwegian-accented Latin falls from his lips, but just because it decays doesn't make it a waste.

Hallvarðr, then Halvard, then Halle. What came before and what will come after still matters, despite the shift being small and slight, a molting rather than a magnificent transformation in the same way that Henrik has picked up and dropped names.

"Do you remember," Halvard asks, examining a flower with his elegant fingers, "the time I tried to kill you?"

"Which time?" A valid question, for Halvard has held many knives to Henrik's throat.

"The first time, when we first met."

(Halvard had discovered Henrik wandering in his lands, a trespasser who he jumped and pinned to the ground. A foe, something unknown, something to snare and examine later.)

"Yeah, I do." Henrik throws handfuls of stones and watches them clatter like raindrops down the rocky outcropping into the water below. "You scared the shit out of me. But what about it?"

"Just thinking about how it has changed."

(A foe, and then a friend.)

"But has it? I mean, I don't mean to say that things *haven't* changed, but it wasn't like that was the last time you *tried* to kill me, and you certainly succeeded in killing me countless times too."

"The same can be said for you," Halvard growls. "It won't be the last."

"Uh, wow, that's, dark, and, uh, ominous."

"I don't mean it like that," he shakes his head, "that I'm intentionally out to get you, or that I'm plotting to murder you in cold blood, or anything like that, it's just," and there's a frustrated pause as Halvard curls his fingers in the air as if he's trying to grasp the words he seeks physically. "It's just. We didn't expect, after that first time, that we'd be enemies at certain points in our lives. Both personally and nationally."

"Maybe it was just us being practically children," more rocks clatter down the cliff side, "to think that it'd be that simple to coexist in harmony."

(A friend no more and a foe forever.)

"Maybe," Halvard echos. "But maybe not."

He thinks on this, watching as a butterfly and a bee rush towards the same flower that only has enough nectar for one of them.

[Denmark, 1397]

“I’m going to trust you.”

“It’s going to be great,” Henrik is as bright as the sun, bouncing with energy and excitement. “Don’t worry! All of us together? In union? We’ll be unstoppable, we’ll be happy!”

Halvard believes him wholeheartedly even though he’s apprehensive.

“We’ll be happy forever!”

Halvard wants to believe his words to be true but he’s experienced enough to know forever never lasts.

He has faith all will be well, but something in his stomach churns.

His faith doesn’t last very long.

[Norway, 1545]

“I’m going to kill you!” Halvard screams, political betrayal and neglect reaching critical mass, chasing Henrik across muddy streets and striking him down with a knife he stole out of the kitchen. He’s furious, he plunges, he comes back up with blood on his face and the frightened shrieks of people around him who flee at the sight of this daylight murder. It takes a few pulls to remove the blade from deep within Henrik’s rib cage, panting hard and watching the blood mingle with the dirty puddles on the street.

His veins are pulsing, the anger of his country thumping like a headache he can't get rid of. He feels better, satisfied at Henrik's terrified face, but also a little lost. He doesn't fight when people seize him, restraining and tearing away the knife he used to cook the two of them dinner last night. The world is without sound to him, conversations like shadows in his ears as law enforcers buzz around him and ask him questions about the crime he just committed. He's still mad, his still heart burns, and he shouldn't have, but he did, and when the blur subsides he's locked in a room and unsure which parts he should apologize for when Henrik comes back and which he should still hate him for.

He makes a list, etching tallies into the floor.

My fault: killing you again, not acknowledging you last night when you tried to make me feel better, stealing your favorite scarf and not returning it even though I know you love it.

His fault: not informing me your government was going to do that to me, refusing to lower your voice even when I told you I didn't feel well, losing my pressed leaf collection when you sold that dictionary that I kept it in.

Not my fault, not your fault, mine and yours, yours and mine. He runs out of room after a while, he moves on to the walls, the ceiling that he can barely reach even on his toe tips. Their list of crimes against each other is complicated and long, some with no excuse and others sharing blame, morally grey and without clear innocence. He runs out of room and uses the dust from the words he carved

to spell out additional things on his mind, dirtying his fingertips.

They'll talk for a long while through the door when Henrik comes back from the dead.

[1977, again, a few minutes later]

“Why does coexistence have to be in harmony, Henrik?”

“Doesn't it by definition?”

Henrik has turned to hurling fist-sized stones down the mountainside, gleefully watching them ploosh into the water below, taking great pride in the disruption. He throws one, grunting and laughing as he watches it soar through the air as Halvard cups a hand around a butterfly that landed on him.

“I'm not so sure.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because,” a sigh, “living in tandem doesn't always mean being harmonious. I think the idea that to coexist is to be automatically peaceful is just a lie. There's always conflict. There are habits of yours that still annoy me after all these years, that I still find aggravating, and you can say the same of me. Right now, we're coexisting, amongst minor conflicts and bumps.”

“But what about the times when our fights and differences were bigger and drove us apart? I wouldn't call that coexisting. We've done bad things to each other.”

“That's true.”

“That's not coexisting.”

“All coexistence means is “to have existence together” but there's nothing in that definition that says there can't be conflict or pain. Herbivores compete for nutrients, plants battle each other for sunlight and pure soil, carnivores may not hunt each other but they still stalk the same scarce prey. The whole natural cycle of being is one of coexistence within conflict, so why should we expect human nature to be any different?”

“You can twist words however you want, Halle, it still doesn't make you right.”

“We're the apex predators of this world,” Halvard lazily grins, teeth showing. “Eating up land and natural resources in order to survive. It's a nasty way of being but it's the only way there is. It's impossible to remove all conflict. ”

“And I'm still saying I don't think that's coexisting, I think that passing it off as the natural way isn't good enough. I think we need to own up to our failure to be good to one another and try to improve, even if we improve slowly or imperfectly.”

“Improvement is the one thing that society and nature have in common. The tool towards improvement is the same too: innovation, creativity.”

They both turn and glance at each other, fondly, and then with great longing even though they're only feet apart.

"Your opinions have changed, some."

"Yours, too."

Henrik attempts to high-five him, holding out his flat palm and beckoning, but Halvard rejects him by turning the other way. Or rather, fake-rejects him, scoffing loudly before whipping back around and taking Henrik by surprise, slamming their hands together with such force that the clap rings throughout the sky. They shake out their hurting hands, buzzing with impact, but Halvard doesn't regret the decision, explaining to Henrik that the momentary terror and confusion on Henrik's face made the pain worth it. Comical, hilarious, Henrik's not as amused but he agrees that he probably looked silly.

"Even if you're a huge weirdo, I've missed talking to you," Henrik says.

"Likewise."

The sound of humming insects separates their conversation, splitting the summer in mismatched halves.

"I missed you in general."

Halvard picks up a large rock and carries it over to the edge, heaving into the open air.

"I wouldn't have taken you up into the mountains," his voice is ever-so-slightly flirtatious, "if I wanted you to go any time soon."

The smile at each other and the sound of breaking water.

[Denmark, 1801]

"I can't be with you anymore," Halvard tells him one morning. "This isn't good for me."

"I know," Henrik looks pained. "I've known for a while."

Halvard expects him to say something in addition, to mournfully explain that even though Henrik wishes he could let him go, he can't, that's the rules, it's a shame. But he doesn't, the lack of words takes him aback, and Halvard very quickly understands that Henrik still wants him here and would beg him to stay if Halvard tried to leave. The still air between them becomes tense, Halvard's eyes glisten and narrow as he stares him down from across the table, lips curling back into a larger frown. He grows disgusted as Henrik's sheepish expression betrays him, knowing that he's been caught.

"Look, Halvard," he uses his full name to denote how serious he is, "I can make you happy here."

"Henrik," Halvard throws his hands up halfheartedly, dejectedly, his tone slowly rising. "You can't make me happy. You can't force your idea of happiness onto others if they don't share that same dream. Don't you get that?"

“But I know I can—”

Halvard bangs his fists on the table.

“No, you can’t. You can try, and I appreciate the effort, but I need, for my own sake, to distance myself from you. Don’t you feel it, too? That this relationship isn’t working? That it’s become rotten?”

“That’s because I haven’t been doing enough.”

“If anything, you’ve been trying too much to fix something that’s already broken and by doing so, you’re making it worse. There’s nothing to salvage, Henrik. Not now.”

Henrik’s hands form fists under the table, his nails digging into the undersides of his hands and leaving indents. He knows Halvard is right, but he doesn’t want to believe it, and he’s never taken failure well.

“I still love you,” Halvard murmurs, getting up from the table and pushing his chair in. “I’m sorry.”

Halvard leaves to cry to himself quietly in the garden while Henrik buries his face into the tablecloth and spills water across the soft fabric.

Henrik prays to the sky for guidance, asking how one satisfies the needs of someone who longs for a home they cannot have.

He gets no answer and continues his best to satisfy the lone wolf by throwing sticks and insisting that they’re rabbits. A lie, a stretch the imagination can’t gap, but there’s nothing he can do to heal the pain.

“How do I keep those who I care about happy?” and “How do I keep those I care about around me?” are two questions Henrik has had to ask himself a lot over the years and he’s starting to realize that sometimes you can’t have both.

To think that the world will bend to your want and whim?

How arrogant.

It takes work and time to fix anything.

But not everything is fixable.

Not all the time.

And some puzzles can only be solved in the future tense.

[Norway, 367]

Henrik—who prior has visited Halvard and showered him with gifts during many fair-weathered summers—again climbs the steep hill up to Halvard’s village. He’s greeted by Halvard’s people

like an old friend, someone who has become trusted. A fellow young god, like their own ancient spirit who guides and represents them. They'll come up with myths to tell their children about the two ageless, death-defying souls who walked among them and how close they became to each other.

"It's fun throwing things off these strange cliffs of yours," Henrik laughs, throwing handfuls of whatever he can get his hands on over the edge.

"They're called fjords."

"Aren't you going to join in?"

"Why."

"Cause it's fun?"

"Fun?"

"You've never thrown stuff off from up high?"

"Why would I?"

"Why *wouldn't* you? C'mere, let me show you!"

He pulls Halvard along, walking him through the movements, movements Halvard is reluctant to complete, but after lazily tossing over his first rock and seeing it crack in three he's hooked.

He tries to pick up one that's too heavy and calls Henrik over to help him with it.

Henrik runs up from behind him and stabs him in the back.

"I'm really sorry," Henrik whispers, sliding it out and pushing Halvard off the edge. "I'm only doing what my leaders told me to do. I hope we can still be friends if you forgive me."

"I'm sorry!" Henrik screams across the valley as Halvard falls to his death

This, too, becomes legend.

It takes a long, long time before Halvard begins to trust anyone, let alone Henrik, after that.

[1977, as the sun starts to lower]

"Remember the first time you killed me? By throwing me off this cliff? Truly, what a special moment that I'll cherish forever."

He's sarcastic by context but his tone isn't clear.

"Is that why you brought me here?" Henrik nervously laughs. "I thought I recognized this place. Are you planning on throwing me off as payback?"

"Of course not. I got my revenge for that long ago. Forgiven you, too."

“Why bring it up?”

“Throwing stuff from high up always makes me think of that day,” Halvard has moved on to throwing dead tree branches, breaking them down into smaller pieces before letting them fall. “That’s all.”

“Sorry.”

A twig snaps.

“I thought it would be a good place to meet precisely because there’s a bad memory attached to this place for the both of us.”

“And maybe we could form a newer, happier one in replacement?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s so thoughtful!”

“Shut up.”

But it works.

And so it ebbs and flows.

There will always be a connection but whether the wire that runs between them is spiked with barbs or silky soft will depend, and will always depend, because there’s always a potential for change, for hybridization, for progress.

Even when it doesn’t feel like progress.

[1977, the day after]

“I don’t think I like this as much anymore,” Henrik says about the beetle-shaped cake Halvard made for him, the one he once considered his favorite.

Halvard hums in response, unphased, and as he takes a drink of his coffee he wonders when he’ll grow to hate the bitter tastes on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

- re: taxonomic names, a lot of people tend to assume that once assigned a scientific name, that's the end. But it isn't, as new information on genetics and other species are found there's a lot of shifting and debate. Example: the Common Moorhen of Europe/Africa/Asia and the Common Gallinule of the Americas were considered the same species until 2011 in which people decided they should be split.

Shaken Bottles Burst

[2008]

He keeps getting emails and he doesn't know what to do about it.

He answers the important ones, about his job, about Iceland, but he's just overwhelmed by the sheer volume that he gets from Henrik and Halvard. They're pointless.

Halvard keeps sending him reminders. Brush your teeth. Do your laundry. Let me mail you something. What's your new address? Are you eating well? Are you feeling well? Are you lonely? An endless stream of these questions and statements that do nothing but make him irritated. He's fine. He doesn't need reminders. He doesn't want this. Why bother.

Henrik is much the same. Have a good day! I hope the weather was nice today! Good luck! You're the best! Be sure to take it easy if you need to! I'm here for you if you need anything! Well wishes and anniversary dates of things things that Jóhannes doesn't even remember. It rubs him the wrong way. He stops reading them.

His inbox piles up, but he can't delete them. They just sit there, marked as unread, lined up like spices in a cupboard. Each surely has a different flavor, but even if he tried to balance out Henrik's sweetness with Halvard's bitter taste, he'd still feel sick.

And Henrik and Halvard say nothing. They don't inquire whether he reads these emails, or why he doesn't respond to them. Jóhannes is anxious, that some day, maybe they'll ask, but as he braces himself for the inevitable prodding, it never comes. He doesn't tell them to stop. He doesn't know how to. It's easier to let them pile up, first into a hill, then into a mountain. He doesn't even read the subjects anymore. It just becomes habit. The same way that he allowed letters to pile up on his doorstep in Iceland, not having the heart to read them, and could only use them as kindling to keep the fire burning and his fingers warm.

One day, when he's been cooped up in his house during the darkest days of winter, he just starts crying.

He doesn't know why. One minute he's sitting on the couch, wrapped up in blankets and listening to the wind howl outside, and the next he feels water dripping down onto his hands. He wipes the tears away, but more come out, no matter how hard he tries to rub it away. His fingers shake and he feels awful, he feels so sad, so alone, and his thoughts can't comfort him. He reaches for his puffin, a desperate attempt to seek contact, but the bird flies to another corner of his tiny apartment.

Jóhannes logs into his computer, sobbing, but his fingers are wobbly and he overclicks.

He intended to try and waste away his sadness by doing something online, watching videos or reading wikipedia articles until he froze himself and his tears over, but there on his screen, by accident, is an open email from last week, from Henrik.

Heeyyyy, guess who loves you? Me! :)

It's such a harmless message, and one he finds a little silly, but right now, it means the world.

He scrolls down to the bottom, years of these messages from Henrik and Halvard, and starts reading them.

I didn't get a chance to tell you this, but your speech was really fantastic! :D

It was good to see you.

If you want to stay here overnight on your way to China, let me know, you always have a place to sleep here!

I'm going to send you more blankets, I noticed some of yours are fraying. Look out for it in the mail.

Hey, I think you'd really like this band, you should check them out! I'll attach a link. <3

I was thinking about you today. Haven't heard from you in a while. Hope everything's okay.

I love you!

I love you.

Thousands of messages, and that's what they say.

He reads them all in one sitting and they make him cry even more. He feels awful for not realizing how heartfelt all of these simple messages are, and that even though Jóhannes hasn't responded to a single one, they keep sending him encouragements.

He flies to Oslo the next week without telling either of them he'll be there. Henrik answers the door, surprised, as Jóhannes buries himself against his chest.

"I feel cold," is all he can manage to say, gripping at Henrik's sides.

"Help me," he requests, as he feels Halvard grab his arm to draw him inside. "I'm so cold."

And he apologizes left and right for the things he's done and the things he hasn't, lying in bed between them, and they tell him:

It's okay.

It's okay.

We love you.

It's okay.

Mittens

[1984]

Berwald and Halvard are the last two people you'd want to be trapped in an elevator with if you're easily intimidated by harsh looks and empty silence. Even when they're together they are quiet people and Berwald often visits Halvard when he has to get work done because he knows that the two of them can spend days without a single verbal word. They do talk when they feel they need to, but verbalization is often difficult for both of them, so they'll sit next to each other and write in a notebook back and forth to discuss their problems or seek comfort. It's a different form of communication than the usual—when Halvard holds up a piece of paper that says "*I need a hug*" or when Berwald uses his hands to sign that he needs to borrow Halvard's car—but it's relaxing to be around somebody who understands. There's no strain to be found and they don't exhaust each other.

Halvard comes to visit him less, as he likes to stay in his home country more than he likes to leave it and Berwald's house has gotten noisier over the years. But he comes, dropping in unannounced, spooking Tino as he slips in through an open window or is found sitting at the kitchen table in the middle of the night when someone gets up to get a glass of water. It isn't strange at all for Berwald to wake up and find Halvard curled up between him and Tino, crawling in while they were sleeping. He'll stroke Halvard's hair fondly, smiling a little before Halvard wakes up with a scowl and demands to be fed.

As Berwald tends his garden, Halvard likes to watch—so still that even birds will land on him as if he's a branch. Sometimes he'll help. Berwald always wears gloves. Halvard prefers to stain his fingers black with dirt. Berwald groans about the number of weeds, slipping through the cracks in stone.

"Disrupts order," he mutters, but Halvard has a contrary opinion, throwing down his trowel.

"Rather, don't you think it's a testament to the tenacity of life? To grow and expand wherever it can, to keep fighting?"

Rule versus chaos, control versus uncertainty, tradition versus freedom. There needs to be a little of both, Berwald agrees, but while he keeps his garden spotless, Halvard allows plants to grow wherever and only rips them from the ground when he finds it pleases him.

[Oslo (then known as Kristiania), 1911]

When the snow starts falling, Berwald gives Halvard a new pair of mittens that he made himself. They're warm, blue with tiny white deer on them, with mismatched buttons because he knows Halvard will be fond of the choice.

"I love them," he smiles, putting them on and covering his cold face with them. "Thank you."

"Mm."

"I love you."

A statement that Halvard doesn't offer very often to anyone, one that often gets caught in his throat. Halvard himself seems surprised that those words came out of his mouth involuntarily.

Berwald chuckles and takes his hands, holding them tightly.

"I love you too, Halle."

They build snowpeople together. Berwald's are perfectly round and inviting and Halvard's are, quite frankly, hellish, with pointed teeth and too many arms, decrepit and confusing.

Halvard makes a snow angel, face pointed at the gloomy sky. Berwald draws a halo around his head with a long stick. Halvard proposes a ridiculous idea. Berwald accepts.

They run around town, crashing into freshly fallen snow and making snow angels as fast as they can, attracting stares as they hurry, making them in the middle of the road, on sidewalks, in people's gardens, Berwald flinging Halvard up onto somebody's roof so they can make one there. It looks strange, and it is a bit strange, having adults run around like fools. But it has no bearing whether you're three or thirty or three thousand, it is during these moments where we fall in love with living.

Halvard clutches the sides of his head and lists off all the conflicts that haunt him—most of them problems that Halvard has unknowingly invented for himself—and Berwald sets him straight, giving practical, slow answers and a reassuring pat on the back.

And then the roles reverse.

And of course, they fight. They've always fought. It's hard to not fight with the lives they lead.

And it's cold and quiet and frigid.

[Stockholm, 2011]

"Fix them," Halvard demands, throwing the aging mittens onto Berwald's desk.

After a century of use they're dirty, with many holes and buttons gone. Tears along the colored seams that no longer protect from the cold and wobbling unwound thread. Berwald can see marks where Halvard tried to fix the gaps himself with needle and thread but his repairs didn't last and were not as tight as they needed to be.

"Yer better off with a new pair."

"No," and he glares. "Fix them."

A glance.

Halvard groans and scribbles something into a notebook he carries in his pocket.

PLEASE. Underlined three times.

<Fine,> Berwald signs with his hands. <But I don't have the same cloth I used to.>

Mix it up. It's fine. You know what I like. As long as they're warm.

<Watch the kids. Tino is in town and the boys both have that look in their eye that they're looking for trouble.>

Easier said than done.

“Where's Dad?” Peter asks, bounding up to the couch that Halvard has sprawled himself upon.

“Which one?”

“Berwald.”

“He's in space. The space police took him. He's in space jail atoning for his space crimes.” Halvard reaches onto the end table and picks up a pair of glasses—one of Berwald's spares—and puts them on. “I'm your new Dad now.”

“Okay Dad, can you take me to the store?”

“Drive yourself,” he playfully sneers without thinking, and it's only after Peter runs off, yelling at Nils that they've finally got permission to drive, that he realizes he's made a terrible mistake and rushes after them to prevent them from wrecking Berwald's car.

Berwald mentions upon giving Halvard back his mittens—made of mostly purple fabric now—that he had to replace most of what was there. They're practically different mittens, he explains, for all the interwoven strings, the buttons, the fabric, are all new. There's barely anything in there that was from the original pair, but Halvard tells him that he's mistaken as he slips them on and covers his face. They're the same, he tells him, through closed eyes.

The rest of the mittens? That which was old and decaying? Useless fibers that would not survive much longer?

Halvard requests those back too, keeping them in a sealed bag in his nightstand, and he awaits the next spring to litter them across the grass so that birds can line their nests with the same warmth that nurtured him for so long.

A (Not So) Merry Time of Year

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[Helsinki, December 23, 1992]

This is a story of one of Halvard Sørensen's many deaths.

He had arrived in Finland the night before, buried deep into the neck of his festive turtleneck, already sick of noise and people before he even arrived on Tino's doorstep. He has been the last one to arrive this year but made no attempt to verbally greet anyone, curling up under the dining room table instead of his usual spot on the couch because Eduard had taken it, chatting alongside Tino. That was *his* spot, but although possessive of it he was, he wasn't about to make an ordeal out of it. Eduard didn't know and it wasn't his fault. Under the table worked just as well. He could cope.

Berwald knelt down and handed Halvard a mug filled with something warm to drink, which he accepted, but Henrik's attempts to entice him out were met with a blank stare. Jóhannes refused to acknowledge him as his brother and kept calling him “the cat under the table” when he was brought up in conversation.

The next day wasn't that different. He socialized, but minimally, and found that he actually enjoyed the space underneath the table. Here, he could observe and listen without people paying attention to him. He only moved in the mid-afternoon when Tino scolded him for getting cookie crumbs all over the floor when he ate them there. He put on an extra sweater as the night blew harsh winds in from the north, but otherwise this was an average gathering.

It is only when he's asked to go downstairs that everything changes.

It's a simple request. Go and get the extension cord that is sitting on the kitchen table. He sets out to do it, mindlessly on autopilot.

And it's a small accident, a tiny misstep, and his eyes widen as he realizes what is happening. He falls, badly, and hits the bottom of the stairs with a loud thud. Multiple voices ask if he's okay, but there's no answer. Not a cause for alarm—as Halvard has a tendency to suffer silently—but now Jóhannes, Eduard, and Berwald poke their heads down the staircase as Henrik rushes, kneels down, and addresses Halvard again. When there's no movement and no harsh comment to Henrik's cheery voice, the Dane reaches for his wrist and checks his pulse. Nothing.

“He's dead,” Henrik murmurs, scratching the back of his head and looking at the trio up atop the staircase, illuminated like angels from the hall light behind them.

“Ya sure?” Berwald asks.

Henrik nods.

If this were to happen in a household of humans, there would be wailing and despair over losing a loved one like this. A single innocent moment ends with unfortunate results, and it is these deaths that are often the most agonizing. Nobody expects death to come like this. But it can, and it does.

But here, in a house of immortals, all who have seen Halvard Sørensen's corpse before, there's simply a bit of disappointment that he'll miss opening his presents. They miss him now and they'll miss him over the next few days, but he'll come back soon enough. There are more pressing matters at hand.

What should be done about the body?

It is hard to kill a nation. Wounds that would kill most mortals will heal quickly, starvation can last for years before it finally takes them, and their immune systems are extraordinarily robust. Every part of them rejuvenates, repairing damage quicker than living creates it, which is why aging seems to be practically nonexistent and stunted in their kind. But they can die.

When the body cannot heal itself fast enough or if an injury is sudden and harsh, death takes hold. The corpse they leave behind has no special properties other than a rate of disintegration that is faster than it is in humans. Give it a week in the proper conditions and hardly anything will remain at all. In winter? If exposed to the elements, he'll be gone in two, with nobody able to tell the difference between the snow and his crushed bones.

The reincarnation system itself is poorly understood. The consensus among the experience of nations is that there's a period of time that feels warm, murky, dark, and nurturing. In this state of semi-consciousness, there's the sensation of floating with no real thoughts or concept of time, just calmness. Then things start coming back to them, they start to think about what happened before their death, sometimes there's the sensation of panicking or feeling rushed. Then suddenly, they take a deep breath, their eyes bolt open, and they're back, in a new body, but a carbon copy of the one they had before. Usually they pop back in their own country, but there are occasions in which a nation ends up somewhere else. This rebirth process can take merely hours or it can take weeks. Depends on the nation in question and the circumstances of their death.

Halvard's average is around three days.

“With his spine cracked like this,” Henrik muses, “I'm guessing it's going to be a little longer.” He examines Halvard's body clinically, but with great care and gentleness as if he was only asleep, shutting his eyelids and smoothing out his hair. “I'll dispose of him.”

“Are you sure you don't want anyone to go with you?”

Henrik is already gathering up Halvard and shakes his head, saying “Nah, I'll be fine.”

“I'll go. I volunteer.”

All eyes are on Jóhannes, with one hand raised halfway, hesitant but still determined. When Henrik insists there is no reason for him to come and that he didn't have to ruin his night, Jóhannes spoke thus:

“You taught me to always live by the buddy system. And you clearly don't have a buddy.”

Henrik laughs, tells him that's a fair enough point, and asks him to get his coat on.

The car is cold and Jóhannes shivers as Henrik places the key into ignition, grinning as the engine begins to roar. The snow is coming down in fat chunks, quickly covering the windshield between the beating of the wipers, and Henrik makes a joke about going on a road trip, asking if Jóhannes brought a mixed tape.

"No music, please," the younger insists, a request which surprises Henrik, but nods as they back out of Tino's driveway and make their way through unplowed streets.

"Sure is coming down, huh? Hopefully we won't get stuck. That'd suck."

"Don't jinx it."

"There's emergency blankets and rations in the backseat. Not that I'm hoping to get lost," he leans closer to the windshield to try to see past the whirling snow, "but I mean, if it does happen, we'll be alright."

"I'm not worried."

"As you shouldn't. I'm an excellent survivalist and I brought an axe."

"Wonderful. Where are we going, anyway?"

"About an hour out of town. There's a patch of dense forest that's mainly untraveled that we've used when stuff like this has happened before. Yeah, occasionally hikers use it too, but it's generally vacant this time of year."

"Wait," he hesitates. "This happens often enough at Tino's that you have a plan?!"

"Well yeah!" Henrik laughs, "I mean, over the years, accidents happen! Sometimes you gotta have a place set aside to hide the bodies of your friends and loved ones!"

"That's twisted," and he feels twisted for smiling about it.

"It's a lot easier to do this than going to the police or something and trying to get them to dispose of it. They ask too many questions and you usually get arrested, it's a real pain. It was soooo much easier to get rid of a body fifty years ago," Henrik complains. "But, yeah. All of us have places near our houses to hide each other if we die, don't you?"

"Of course not! No person has ever died in my house, Henrik!"

"There's a first death for everything, better start thinking about it."

They get momentarily caught in a snowbank before they finally lurch forward.

"... When's the last time you died?"

"Late eighties," Henrik bites his lip in thought. "Tried to climb up the side of a mountain 'cause I got dared to by Gilbert, lost my grip, and that's the end of that story. You?"

"I don't know. The thirties maybe?"

"Wow, you're gonna make us look bad, with a track record like that."

"Shut up."

Twenty minutes later, Henrik asks him why he volunteered to come.

"I. Don't know," he began, "I guess it's been a long time since I've seen any nation die, and I'm kind of curious. Is that bad?"

"Jóhannes, curiosity isn't a bad thing. If we weren't curious by nature, do you think humans would've have built the car we're riding in now? I don't think so. What curiosity can *lead* to can be harmful, but simply observing? Nah. It's not weird or bad at all to be curious. It's not weird to take a drive in a snowstorm with your brother's corpse in the trunk to see what happens on the day before Christmas eve."

"Wow, *thanks* Henrik, it *totally* doesn't sound weird at *all* when you word it like *that!*"

But they glance at each other and faintly laugh.

"We'll be there soon. You gonna be warm enough? You wanna to borrow my coat?"

"I'll be fine."

"Suit yourself," Henrik shrugs, bringing the car into park.

Out here the storm is weaker, but the snowfall is still heavy and the entire sky is obscured by clouds. The first thing Henrik does is hand Jóhannes a high-powered flashlight and a shovel before slinging Halvard's body over his shoulder.

"Henrik, why is he naked," Jóhannes groans.

"If I buried him in one of his favorite sweaters *I'd* be the one you'd be burying the next time he saw me. And I mean, all his clothes would go to waste and they won't decompose as fast as he will."

"Fair enough."

"We gotta walk for a bit, there was a nice thicket of brambles when I was here a few years ago. That'd be a good spot."

Slugging through the fresh snowfall is hard, laborious, and slow. Jóhannes hunches up to keep heat in but soon grows used to the chill and the numbness of his face. Henrik motions for him to stop.

"Hand me the shovel", he says, setting Halvard's body atop the light snow, but Jóhannes shakes his head.

"I want to do it. I think," he grips the handle. "If that's okay."

Henrik is taken aback and stares at him in shocked wonder. "If you want to, sure? I can get another shovel too and help you out."

"No," he shakes his head. "Just. Instruct me."

"We aren't going to bury him deep, just enough to cover his body. If we bury him too deep his body will keep longer as it freezes. If it's surface level, it'll still be a while before he's gone because it's so cold, but he'll still decompose a lot quicker than the body of a human or an animal. And speaking of animals, keeping him close to the surface will mean that hopefully nature's little friends will come help out."

"Gotcha."

"Just start digging, I'll let you know what to do."

"It seems empty, somehow," Jóhannes says, standing above Halvard's body in the shallow grave he dug. He leans on the handle of the shovel and thinks, exhaling a puff of air, frowning as Henrik brings the flashlight closer. "Do you think, we can, you know..."

"Hmm?"

Jóhannes fumbles with his words. "Like, I mean, I know he's not really dead and he's coming back, but maybe, like, we could give him some sort of funeral rights? It feels weird to me, to not... do that, I guess."

"Yeah! Certainly. I get you. What do you want to do?"

Jóhannes breaks off a low tree branch, barren and easily snapped into smaller straight portions which he places around Halvard's head like a halo, like antenna radiating outwards. Henrik leans down and folds Halvard's hands across his chest while Jóhannes thinks, his mouth squiggling.

"Hold on," and he digs into his pockets for anything of value. Henrik follows his lead, and between them they come up with a handful of assorted hard candies, a worn blue handkerchief, bent puffin feathers, spare coat buttons, miscellaneous change, and an empty tin box that once kept breath mints.

"These are going to be weird grave goods," Jóhannes mutters.

"You figure out what to do with them, I'm going to see if there's anything nearby."

When Henrik returns, Halvard appears to be half covered in snow, but as he's come closer he'd mistaken. Jóhannes has built false clothes out of snow, decorating the neckline with the puffins feathers and nestling the tin box between Halvard's hands, giving the illusion he's holding on got it, even in death. He has torn the handkerchief into strips of fabric, tying them like bracelets around Halvard's wrists, and used the remaining fabric to tie matching rings around his ankles. The change and buttons are embedded into his snowy clothes in a patterned formation while the candies are unwrapped, placed in between the sticks around Harvard's head like jewels on crown. The wrappers themselves litter the ground seemingly randomly but Henrik can tell they've been strategically placed, shining like treasure around Halvard's body in the flashlight's glow.

"You did a good job!"

"What did you find?"

"Nothing much, but I did find this in a pocket I forgot about" he holds up a piece of paper. "It's the boarding pass I used to get here."

"Give," he demands, tearing it into shreds and making a tiny cup-like indentation out of snow. Jóhannes pulls a lighter out of his pocket and burns each piece slowly, carefully collecting the ashes, and mixes it with snow to form a slate colored paint.

"When did you get yourself a lighter?"

"You never know when you need to burn something. Comes in handy."

With his fingers first, Jóhannes paints designs on his brother's face, accenting his under eyes and cheekbones with lines and dots, whatever feels right. He covers his entire neck and finishes by using a thin twig to run fine details, and by the time he considers painting Halvard's arms he's run out of ashpaint.

The final act before they bury him consists of Jóhannes removing the two inconspicuous hairpins that Halvard had lazily pinned back his hair with—non-ornamental and dark brown—sliding them out, replacing them with two long twin needles from a pine tree.

"See you soon," Henrik salutes at Halvard, and momentarily Jóhannes witnesses Henrik become washed over by sadness even though it isn't really the end. Something comes over Jóhannes and without thinking, he hugs Henrik, who hugs him back, but neither of them speak of this and work together to bury Halvard under fresh snow. A few fallen tree limbs are dragged over so that the likelihood of this patch of snow being discovered by people decreases. It's complete, Henrik snuffles a little—from the cold or because he misses Halvard, Jóhannes isn't sure—and they make their way back to the car, obscuring the tracks behind them in silence.

"I don't want you to tell Halle about this," Jóhannes says once they're about halfway back to the party.

"About you coming and doing what we did?"

"Yeah. Please?"

Henrik nods. "Yeah, sure. I mean, I don't think there is any harm in Halle knowing, and I think he'd be weirdly happy about it, but if that's what you want, I won't say a word. I can keep a secret."

"You promise?"

"Promise. I'll even let everyone else know that's what you want, too."

"Thanks," and Jóhannes buries himself deep within his coat in the passenger's seat.

Halvard appears on Tino's doorstep, under-dressed and shivering with an irritated look on his face, on the eve of the new year. He mutters something getting too old for this, cursing a little as he's wrapped up in a blanket and falls asleep on the couch well before the sun goes down.

Jóhannes still has his hairpins in his pocket.

He keeps them.

Chapter End Notes

- The burial rights aren't based on any one tradition or anything in particular in terms of country/culture, but even within cultures burial rights change over time and people have different ways of respecting their dead. But burial rights are something that's pretty universal across cultures, and I think it stems from this respect for people (and sometimes even non-human life) that we love and care about. How we view and treat death as a culture and how we react to it under different circumstances is something that's interesting to me, which is one of the reasons I choose to write a lot about life and death as subjects. I think as nations too, since they've seen so much life/death in their years, both amongst themselves and with other regular humans, their concept of life and death is probably a little different from most people's.

In general I tend to very strongly reject the idea that death automatically has to be a sad, devastating thing. Can it be? Absolutely, and based on my own experiences, it can really impact your entire life. But I think "x is dead, therefore this is sad and miserable" is an oversimplification of both death as a concept and how complex people's feelings can be, even outside the context of Hetalia.

Some personal meta about how I interpret things here: Johannes and Henrik both strike me as people who, generally and modernly, would react to death in sort of a gentle way. It's something that's sad, but necessary, and I think they'd both feel a compulsion to go out of their way to do something extra or spend a little more time reflecting and thinking about it when they can. "Loving" is the word that keeps coming to mind, I think they're both very loving people with big hearts (although they're very different in how they behave), and I think that sense of love crosses over very strongly into how they view death and the dead as a concept.

- Shoutout to a friend who is well-versed in information about causes of death and dead bodies who talked to me for 2-3 hours. Halvard falling in the way he does generally would not cause an immediate death, but can still happen, and we both discussed it at length to make sure it was an actual possibility.

- I burned various forms of paper in my backyard to make paint out of water and ash and see if it could be used as ornamental paint on myself as a test, how much certain sizes of paper would allow for how much paint, what does it look like when painted on a person, etc. I have no snow or cold weather where I live so I couldn't test it in conditions that it takes place in the fic but I'm pretty sure it would still work.

- The pine leaves Johannes uses are *Pinus sylvestris*. *Pinus palustris* is the pine species I'm familiar with and was what I was imagining when writing the fic because *palustris* needles form a double pronged hairpin-looking shape, which was what I was imagining, but it only exists in the lower US states and I should've thought to think that tree species were not going to be the same between Florida and Finland haha. From what I can tell, *sylvestris* has a similar needle shape and you can get dual-pronged needles similar to what I was imagining and it does exist in Finland, but since

I can't actually touch and pick off the needles myself to make sure, I can only do my best.

And you might be saying "Pyrr, I don't think anyone is going to be criticizing your misinformation and mistakes about trivial conifer species, you fucking nature nerd," but I do care about explaining my thought process and being specific about that knowledge, because I am, deep down, a nature nerd, who cares a lot about being at least mostly accurate about some #nature facts.

Jóhannes' Untitled Poem No. 3

Bonds
Break
Separate
Reform, in different combinations
In the context of chemistry

With different forms
Different formulas
Develop
Mutate
Evolve

Two isomers composed of the same parts
Are still different
Two hydrogens and an oxygen can break chemical compounds apart
And put them back together just as fast
Water divides us just as much as it bonds us

If humans are mostly water, why wouldn't we be fluid?
Bonding
Breaking
Separating
Reforming, with clasped hands and weary smiles

Before doing it all over again
Developing
Mutating
Evolving

Cross Words

Halvard sits, slumped over on the couch with Tino's head resting on his thighs like a pillow. Tino chats with him, with a low airy voice, explaining something that Jóhannes can't make out as he passes them by on his way outside. He hears the deep humming of Halvard, the kind of hum he only makes to convey passive interest or affection—but Jóhannes isn't sure which it is until he sees Halvard stroke Tino's hair. Affection, at least mostly.

He passes by them again an hour later and they've both moved, with Halvard sitting on the floor while Tino jabs his elbow into Halvard's shoulder, who winces, but tells him to dig harder, just a little to the left. Snippets of commentary, Tino concerned about how tightly wound Halvard's muscles are and Halvard sighing about the pains in his back. Jóhannes grabs a soda out of the fridge and passes them by, out the door again to fish in the midday heat.

His next return, the couch is empty. The two migrated into the kitchen before his arrival and Jóhannes reclaims the still-warm seat as his own—picking up a crossword book he left on the end table three summers ago and resumes his puzzle to the sound of Tino's high laughter and the clinking of glasses.

At first glance, Halvard and Tino didn't think that they would be friends. The way they spoke, the way they carried themselves, their mannerisms—all of it made them walk away from their first meeting with thoughts of “I don't think I like him.” But this was an incorrect assumption, as they quickly learned that they were more alike and more complementary than they thought.

They are both weird people, with strange ideas and they like doing things differently. Quirky, one could say, although quirky gives off the air that their whimsical nature is cute, something precious and endearing. At times, it can be this. Halvard's sometimes terrible fashion sense and Tino's love for naming things do occasionally have this quirky-chic aspect that people are fond of.

But then there's the time that Halvard tried to go on a date dressed in a full suit of armor in a time period and place that was highly inappropriate. Tino driving his car into the lake because he “just felt like doing it and wanted to see what would happen.” Halvard staying up for three days and refusing to interact or acknowledge that anyone else exists because he's too busy rigging online polls so that the most ridiculous answer wins. Tino going to the zoo and re-naming every single animal something “better” much to the agony of those he went with.

And then there's the time that Tino decided to make cookies and Halvard wondered if pretzel pieces would taste good with the peanut butter in the batter. Then Tino mentioned something about jelly going with the peanut butter, Halvard wondering if jelly beans would work instead, Tino dumping an entire bag of multi-flavored jelly beans into the mix, both of them realizing they don't have any salt for the recipe, Halvard suggested looking in Peter's unused chemistry set instead of going to the store and getting more, Tino wondering if this compound with a long name tasted good.

“It says it's non-toxic, go for it,” was all Halvard said before Tino dumped the entire container into the mix.

Their game of “mystery kitchen,” as they dubbed it, ended abruptly when their “cookies” ended up causing the oven to violently explode.

Not all of their chemistry is explosive.

They're content to sit around watching daytime television, leaning against each other for hours, knowing not to wake the other when they occasionally drift off. Halvard tags along with him to concerts, hanging around on the sidelines or in the back, but Tino will get him to independently dance like no other person can. They'll spend days out in the wilderness camping and living off the land, masters of stealth and both of them sharpshooters of high caliber. They'll read the same books and discuss their interpretations over text.

Typically, their relationship is soft and relaxing, and there's nothing volatile about it at all.

But it can be, sometimes.

There's a clatter in the kitchen and it's only getting louder, the kind of noise that makes you curl up within yourself and wrap layers of defense around your heart and brain because you're afraid of what it means. The kind of conversations you don't want to overhear through the walls but you do anyway, fights you have no place in but still feel the blows even if they aren't directed at you. You don't know the whole story, you're just handed sticky fragments that won't leave your mind.

It's a sparkler, a rogue firework, sputtering sparks and revving up of the engine. Tino's shouting, he's angry, hurt, firing rockets and asking why Halvard would even say something like that, why would he say something so hurtful and cruel, words so insulting and spoiled. And Halvard's defense is of held out palms and insistence that he didn't know his misplaced remarks would produce such a hurricane, that he didn't mean it in the way Tino interprets his stray words.

An avalanche is still an avalanche even if you try to snowball it back up the mountainside.

"I'm sorry!" Halvard exclaims.

Tino growls, "I need more time before I can accept an apology from you."

"But."

"Don't even try, Halle! Just. Don't even try. Let me be angry, and leave me alone."

Jóhannes only sees the aftermath, Tino's red face as he slams the door behind him as he leaves to chop firewood to make peace with himself and Halvard's face drained of color and unable to swallow.

And from his seat, curled up on the couch, Jóhannes has the best view in the house. He's preoccupied with solving puzzles on paper, but he glances up to see Tino bring an axe down hard to split log after log.

A four letter word for anger, across. Rage.

Halvard shuffles into another room, fingers tight around an arm as if he's trying to close a wound with his palm. Jóhannes can only hear the creaks of the floorboards as he orbits, circling in the other room, before the sound stops.

A seven letter word for nervousness, down. Anxiety

Every mistake clings to him like a burr.

An hour passes. The wood pile grows, the walls are silent. Peter and Nils approach Tino as he splits a large log in two, and even though he's still angry, he smiles at his children and asks about what they did today. Jóhannes finishes his crossword and Halvard worries even though he knows that this fight isn't relationship-breaking.

When Tino comes back inside, smelling of splintered wood and sweat, he coaxes Halvard out—curled up and hiding in bed—who still avoids eye contact.

“I'll accept your apology now.”

“I was insensitive. I'm sorry.”

Tino flicks Halvard's forehead. “Me too. I'm sorry for yelling.”

He opens his arms and grins, Halvard awkwardly accepts, misfitting into each other until Halvard gets the idea to pull him down, and Tino laughs as they try to escape each other's grasp and get off the bed.

Jóhannes only hears fractions.

An Analysis of What it Means to be Ordinary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[Tampere, 1998]

With brightly colored chalk, Berwald draws a perfect circle and sits back on the sidewalk with a “hmpf.” He motions for Nils to pass him the green and outlines the land of earth, filling it in meticulously and as perfectly as the uneven cement allows. Peter joins him, taking care of the blue oceans, while Tino designs rocketships and Nils paints them red and blinding yellows. Trails of shooting stars and humorous doodles of astronauts on the moon’s surface lead up the stairs where Eduard sits, clapping his chalky hands together (leaving a white powdery cloud around his head momentarily) before turning the radio on and finding a station that plays fitting music for the summer’s day. Tino’s dog sleeps in a patch of sunshine when she’s not licking faces and scampering around in the grass.

The solar system continues, conversation bubbles forth when everyone isn’t singing along with the songs they know. The children giggle over the images their imaginations have dreamed of, grown ups discuss trivial things but contribute to the collective dreaming, each of them designing aliens to scatter about their world. Eduard takes photographs of the sprawling art, of the artists, and asks Tino if he would take a picture of himself next to his rendition of a black hole, grinning alongside the event horizon.

And they are unspectacular, underwhelming, a picture of a family cutout of a magazine ad that has that certain manufactured sweetness that can’t possibly be real.

And all seems ordinary.

And perhaps they are. As representatives of a whole collective, as nations, they can be nothing but ordinary. The common denominator, the consensus amongst the people, these are what help shape and define them. They are pillars of what is standard, what is common, what is the most easily palleted and swallowed. Like-minded people with like-minded tastes which are only reinforced by their like-minded societies. Nobody is exempt from the influences of the cultures they are exposed to. From afar, when generalized, everything is ordinary.

It’s word that is often spoken with a hint of scorn.

“It’s so ordinary, so typical, having no outstanding qualities.”

“It’s so normal, plain, and tasteless.”

[Whatever country you call home, whatever time suits you best]

Scenario: you’re in a pet store, meandering among the shelves on a busy day. You ignore the other people around you—you might briefly notice the long hair of a woman who walks by you or the pretty eyes of one of the employees who helps you to find what you are looking for, but as a whole you won’t remember these people. By this time next year, you won’t remember the details in full.

There's a tall man to your left, frowning heavily in thought with his hand on his chin, with sharp glasses and a cleanly cut head of hair. What a tall person, you might remark within your own thoughts, and maybe you text your friend about it because you have nothing else better to say, but he's more or less ordinary to you, just another customer in this standard store on a gloomy Tuesday.

There's another man standing in front of the parrots who are on display. You would totally miss that he existed if we didn't point him out, just a head of blonde hair in the crowd with a lazy grin and his hands shoved deep into his jean pockets. You don't care, and why should you? Both men are minor details and the only reason why you're being told about them is because they're relevant to the narrative.

But when you look to your left again, the tall man is carrying way too many cans of dog food, and more miraculously, balancing them in such a way that is both an engineering marvel and an artistic statement. You're so worried he's going to drop them all and send them rattling and clanking across the floor, but he walks over to the register and sets them all on the counter so gracefully that you nearly find yourself putting your hands together and applauding his actions.

And then, you turn your head as you hear noise, the noise of the other man headbanging and screaming incomprehensible words with ten parrots on his arms, mimicking his actions and sounds as best they can. He laughs, slightly maniacally, looking like the unholy fusion of a death metal singer and a zookeeper, before worried workers ask him kindly to stop.

Moments before, you wouldn't have remembered these people or this trip to the store.

But now you will, simply because it was abnormal.

It wasn't ordinary

But why is being ordinary such a bad thing to begin with? Why do people wrinkle their faces and talk down to what is average with such disdain? How many times do you hear people sneer and use that same semi-elitist tone used to condemn the common about things that are considered contrary to ordinary?

"That's not ordinary," people will say about groups that they perceive to be unlike them that they don't understand. "That's too weird, normal people don't behave that way. I'm not strange like they are. I am perfectly ordinary while they are anything but."

Berwald and Tino both have experienced these sorts of comments directed at them.

And it has hurt them. Perhaps Berwald's preferred alignment with rules and order comes from all the comments he heard for hundreds of years about his behavior and what he liked. Even when not directed at him, there were comments he overheard, slurs and insults flung about carelessly that stung him deeply. You could theorize that by trying to control aspects of his life in such an exact way originates from those blows. It's harder to find fault with someone who tries to be ordinary and in line with the norm, to be just another reed among reeds.

And really, there's no way of winning. There is always going to be someone who looks at you and says "what an ordinary, unremarkable person" and others who will view aspects of you as so otherworldly and absurd they can't possibly accept you as valid. You will do the same to others, classifying them by labels in much the same way Tino organizes all of his music albums: casually

and by your own personal tastes.

Like many people, Berwald and Tino got to know each other by learning falsely. Tino was convinced that Berwald's strange language was the result of a head injury disrupting his perfectly good Uralic language, for everyone spoke in such a way, there were no such other ways of speaking. He had a blood-stained bandage wrapped around his head, this made Tino's theory a plausible thing, and when he ran to find Eduard to marvel together at such a strange visitor his cousin came to the same conclusion.

For Berwald, there was much the same confusion, and his ears couldn't believe what he was hearing, this language that he tried to mimic but his tongue couldn't perform the same acrobatics that these easterners seemed to perform with ease. They kept talking to him as if he could understand them but he couldn't, and he regretted not asking Halvard or Henrik come along with him on his journey.

The bandage? With the dark red blood? Simply old berry stains on an old rag, atop his head to hide a disastrous haircut that Henrik and Halvard had performed together. But Tino didn't find out this truth until well into the early 1900s.

"He speaks so strangely," Tino sighed, rubbing his forehead against Eduard's shoulder, "but his messed up words sound so pretty."

He later retracted that statement when he was forced to learn the language and use it in place of his own. Then it became something awful.

Tino didn't hate Berwald as a person but he didn't like him either. They saw each other minimally and after the novelty of a new person wore off it became somewhat of a pain to deal with him because of political interactions and conquest. And really, they spent most of their early years together as a unit, under Kalmar, and there Tino much preferred to hang out with Henrik, whom shared similar interests and energy. Then the violence started, the daily fights, and he distanced himself from them, hiding in the shadows at the sight of Halvard rising up out of his seat and tearing Henrik and Berwald apart with clenched teeth. And it was Halvard that he found an ally in, first by force, and then by choice.

In the beginning this was scary, when jovial meetings around the table they shared turned into brawls. But then as it became ordinary, after a while it didn't seem like anything was wrong. It hurt, but it hurt less than it did in the beginning, as if repetition numbed themselves to the actual horror and pain of their daily actions.

[Copenhagen, 1523]

"I overheard," Halvard winces as Tino pulls out a shard of glass from his arm from an earlier skirmish gone wrong, "I'm nearly certain Berwald is going to be leaving soon, and you with him."

"I really would hate if that were true."

"You really think staying here is any better?"

"Probably not, but I'd rather be around *everyone* than just one person, especially Berwald, I'd really hate having to live with him the most."

“It’s the opposite for me,” Halvard shuts his eyes haughtily and grumbles as Tino removes another sliver. “If I could go run away with Berwald and Jóhannes for the next two hundred years I would do so in a heartbeat. Berwald isn’t really that bad.”

“Maybe to you, but he’s frightening and weird to me.”

“Didn’t you think similar things about me when we met?”

Tino laughs and wraps up Halvard’s arm neatly after cleaning his wounds. “Yeah, but you’re different.”

“I really wish I could beg you to not leave me here alone,” Halvard whispers after a long silence, running his fingers over Tino’s bandage work, “but that’s not realistic.”

Halvard stands up and looks down at him, shuffling a little bit before finding the right words.

“So all that I ask,” and there’s a small, tired, sad smile, but the first true smile that Tino has ever received from him nevertheless, “is that you won’t forget about me.”

Tino mourns the loss of Halvard from his everyday life the whole way on the long journey to Sweden.

[Stockholm, 1604]

From ordinary to “awkwardnary” are the first few months in the Swedish capital, uncomfortable and unfamiliar even though Tino has his own separate place away from Berwald’s, a demand he hammered into his boss’s head as frequently and loudly as he could during the months leading up to Sweden’s escape. Being forced to live with people who are constantly at each others’ throats, imposed by the government to live together for the sake of political ease, was inhumane.

“But you aren’t human,” the protests always are, “so why should you have the same rights?”

“Aren’t I more human because I live because of humans? Aren’t I more human because I am a representation humanity itself?”

An argument echoed by every nation to their superiors at least once.

In this case, Tino’s demands were granted to him.

He stares out his second story window of his home in the morning and wonders if Halvard had asked to be separate, to live three blocks down the road with his brother in a tiny home where he wasn’t splitting up fights and wasn’t forced to endure the crossfire. Maybe Henrik and Berwald wouldn’t have fought as much if they weren’t bound to share the same roof. Every single one of them had run away from the house at some point, for days, weeks, months, Halvard managed to evade responsibility for nearly a year once, but that meant nothing in the grand scheme of things. Like fish on a hook, sooner or later they were always reeled back in.

As much as he hated Stockholm he enjoyed this little taste of freedom, but he would enjoy it much more if Berwald wouldn’t come around on non-work related business. Tino writes letters to Eduard about this, who spends his time running hurriedly around between different empires who

own his countrymen.

There's a late meeting and Berwald offers to walk him home, a thing Tino is too polite to refuse but he spends most of his time talking aloud with himself so that Berwald has no chance to speak. There's a time Tino forgot money and Berwald bought lunch for him but Tino sat next to a young government official and chatted instead. Tino didn't want to be close with him after seeing what he was capable of, as a man of violence and force who did things in ways that Tino didn't approve of.

Was this rude? He asks Eduard this when he stops by, who answers the question diplomatically, which is to say, not at all.

And then there's the matter that Berwald keeps trying to speak to him in Finnish, the words dropping out of his mouth awkwardly, brokenly, which only makes Tino frustrated. He interprets it as Berwald treating him as if he's stupid enough to not understand Swedish, as if he's rubbing it in that the Finns are under rule of another kingdom.

None of this is Berwald's intent but Tino is so blind to what he thinks to be true, his observations of what he perceives to be Berwald's intentions, that he doesn't realize what it all means until much, much later.

As he forgets the violence of Kalmar and normalizes his life spent traveling back and forth from Sweden to Finland, with and without Berwald, he falls into a familiar routine and none of his thoughts and feelings are challenged.

[Uppsala, 1738]

Tino wakes up and everything hurts, his head spins, and he realizes that he's not in his home, he's not feeling very well, and as his vision stabilizes he realizes that he must be in a hospital.

Oh. That's right. I remember.

The runaway horses, Tino not paying attention until the heavy carriage slammed into him and sent him rolling along the bumpy streets. People crowding around him, the loss of consciousness, and here he is with two broken legs.

He turns and on the bedside counter are a few wilted flowers in a cheap vase, but there is only one get well card, written in messy lettering by the small daughter of a diplomat. A child Tino often played with, a girl too young to understand that her friend didn't need well wishes to get better from such an injury. In nation-terms a severe injury such as this is more like a paper cut: inconvenient, unpleasant, a little painful, but nothing more. The card makes him smile anyway, but smiling makes him dizzy, so he flops his head to the other side.

The other side, where Berwald sits, knitting something quickly with his giant hands and glasses sliding far down his nose, close to falling off, with his gaze stooped down in concentration. Tino's smile quickly fades, replaced with an annoyed grimace which he covers up by placing his hands atop his face and grumbles into them.

"I'm sorry," Berwald says, in Finnish.

"Would you just quit it!? Are you trying to provoke me, speaking in my language?"

“Provoke?” a switch to Swedish, to reflect Tino’s request. “That’s a misunderstanding: I just feel bad for ya.”

“Feel... *bad* ?”

And in those four sentences, Tino’s entire perspective started change. Berwald was never trying to mock him, but connect with him, to reach out and say he was sorry for a multitude of things that weren’t quite his fault and a few that were. Berwald was trying to understand him better, to say “I rule over you by law but as people I’d rather be your equal.” Berwald was trying to be his friend.

They talked, rapidly dismantling their false images of each other. Tino wasn’t stuck up or rude, he felt overwhelmed by Berwald’s presence and didn’t know what to make of his intentions. Berwald wasn’t controlling of others, he just felt the need to take care of people around him, in ways, he personally admitted, were at times overbearing. Tino preferred dramas and comedies instead of the newspapers that Berwald caught him reading out of, Berwald hated fighting and preferred art projects and home-keeping despite Tino seeing him taking his most careful notes during meetings about the status of the military.

“I’m scared of ya.”

“You’re scared of *me* ?!” A statement of disbelief so loud it could be heard three halls down. “I’m the one that’s scared of *you* ! Why didn’t you explain all of this *years* earlier?”

“Didn’t know how.”

They just stared at each other, in awe, like total strangers even though they had seen each other since childhood, Tino sunk his hands onto his face again and laughed and laughed and laughed, ugly laughter but true laughter while Berwald blinked at him with a confused but intrigued expression.

The distance between one another, which had seemed impassable, started to fade away. It didn’t change all at once, but on that day Tino decided that Berwald wasn’t so bad. It wasn’t so much a liking, but a willingness to try.

And by that time next year, Tino was certain that he liked Berwald. He was a good friend, but Tino still sometimes found himself fearing his stark expressions just as much as Berwald found Tino’s quirks and language confusing.

It is always like this in the beginning. Tino had first fallen in love with Henrik, then with Halvard, and then he found himself one day watching Berwald fondly from afar and realized that he had fallen in love with Berwald, too.

[Stockholm, 1809]

One day, Tino leaves for good, again by the ever changing rules of conquest and diplomacy. It is Russia that he will now be apart of, but on the morning of his last day as a subject of Sweden, Tino doesn’t feel that different, and he questions to himself why that is.

Maybe he’s simply gotten used to be passed around by nations and the upset of it isn’t as deep as it once was. Maybe it isn’t a nation’s borders that matter at all; he’s still Finland as long as there are still Finns, regardless of what empire rules over them. But what about the Finnish-speaking Swedes

and the Swedish-speaking Finns? Who do they belong to? Which do they pledge their allegiance to? Are they under Berwald's collective, or are they Tino's? Is it possible to be both? He'll discuss these things with Ivan in the near future and neither of the two will ever come up with a clear answer to any of it.

Most of his things are in Finland already, moved in preparation, so leaving Stockholm is easy. He takes one last look at his home, picking up his rifle and slinging it over his shoulder, and wanders through town to chat with some of the locals that he's befriended during his stay. He'll be back, one day, as his own nation simply visiting the home of a friend, and he'll have to hold his tongue when he meets the grandchildren of old coworkers here. "I knew your grandfather," he'll want to say to a woman physically older than he, but he'll swallow those words and simply offer a casual lunch date instead.

Berwald is waiting for him at his last stop before heading to the east. Tino jokingly aims the rifle at Berwald's chest and imitates the gun going off as he approaches, a joke that Berwald doesn't find very funny, but he's under no obligation to find every part of Tino desirable. He reaches down and pries Tino's fingers from the gun, curling them around his own fingers instead, and hums once with closed eyes before letting go.

<I love you, you know,> he signs.

"I know," Tino replies.

<Be safe.>

<You, too.>

Tino turns his back and runs, not wanting to be late, but his pace slows, until he's walking, and then standing, only a handful of meters away. He turns, pivoting with the same precision as a marching soldier, coming back from which he came, stomping, then running, in heavy boots clunking against the ground. He stands before Berwald again, peering up with bright eyes, and kisses him quickly before running back to where he once stood. He turns again.

"I love you, too!" he yells, then runs, and before long he's just a dot far in the distance.

Berwald's heart skips a beat.

It feels good.

And then it just hurts.

A statement that I generally find to be true: most things fade over time. Verbally, the word "fade" conveys this notion of disappearance, something we perceive giving way to nothingness. While this maybe works with smoke dispersing or the dying of a language, this doesn't hold true for matters of the mind and heart. There are some pains that are so great that you never really forget. Over time, maybe, it hurts less and less until it feels like nothing at all. You've gotten used to it, that pain you carry becomes ordinary to you, but if you were to pass the burden onto another heart, one that isn't yours, they might cry out in pain over scarring that to them is anything but ordinary.

This applies to things other than pain as well. People have all sorts of individual talents and skills and if they are honed and practiced they become extraordinary to others. "Genius!" they'll cry out,

“how marvelous!” an onlooker might say while harboring envy, and others will crowd around to see the person who can do such novel and beautiful things. How unordinary it is, look, look.

But to the owner of that talent, they probably don't feel the same way. They look at what others perceive to be great and all they see is average, mundane, ordinary, because to them, that's what it is. Their progression from amateur to greatness happened at such a pace that they give it no mind. It's ordinary because it's theirs. They live with it every day. The people who find it extraordinary are simply onlookers, marveling like guests at a zoo, gawking at an exotic creature.

Early on in the rejuvenation of their relationship, Berwald nearly scraps an entire table because to him, it's too imperfect. It's not the best of his skill, he messed up, it's not the way he wants it to be. The only thing that stops him is Tino coming in and gushing compliments, not knowing that Berwald's carving hobby as a kid has grown into such refined art and finds it astounding.

“Are you really going to throw this away? Why? It's so cool! Could I have it? I love it, it would go perfectly in my home.”

Suddenly a talent that seems ordinary to you is revealed to actually be extraordinary by someone else.

It doesn't have to be anything big. Maybe your sleeping habits are curious to another person. Maybe you can multitask in a way that is impossible to another. You can sing the alphabet backwards, you hold your pencil different, the expressions of your own face may be ones that nobody else can replicate in the same way. Someone out there finds you not ordinary, in a good way, believe me.

But it is easy to get caught up in desiring the extraordinary. Most love stories, even the tragic ones, romanticize and idolize this idea of love that transcends all. Love that is extraordinary, love that transcends time and space, love that is the be all, end all, a love that people desire.

Love, indeed, is a powerful force.

But I much prefer it when it is an ordinary thing.

Love between friends, love for the world around you, hypothetical loves and loves rooted in reality, the love for a pet, the love for your favorite color, the joy your heart swells in when you obtain something you truly desire. The loves that are overlooked, the loves that are common, the loves that are untold in stories, the simple joys that come along with being alive. It is so ordinary but it is so beautiful, it is so very beautiful. I am in love with being in love with everything.

The next time you cradle your favorite cup in your hands, the next time you bury yourself in your favorite blanket, the next time you look at the sky and find it pleasant, take a moment and try to feel that simple feeling of fondness and relish it for all that it is worth. That love is just as important as the love told in fairy tales, love that some people will never feel, love that people don't want to feel, love that is impossible to obtain.

And so my favorite love story between Tino and Berwald is not one of excessiveness, nor is it the declarations of how much they care about each other, but the simple image of two people at an imperfect table, drinking lukewarm coffee while doing paperwork, and coming to the realization at the same time that they feel perfectly at ease with each other. They look up, smile fondly, and continue their work, with unspoken, unsaid love, but an ordinary, extraordinarily beautiful love all the same.

[Tampere, 1998, a few hours later]

At the end of it Eduard laments that he doesn't have sidewalk to do this kind of thing at his apartment in Tallinn, but suggests one of his other properties in the countryside might be fun to visit and create art in, hinting but not directly saying that he's lonely sometimes when he resides in such a large house without anyone else. The proposal is considered over the dinner table: Estonia isn't that far of a journey and Berwald says he'd like to see how the countryside has changed since the last time he roamed the fields, long ago. Eduard notices Peter and Nils speaking Finnish and teaches them some Estonian words too, some of which share the same roots and others which differ. Language, a popular topic when multiple languages are commonly spoken here, becomes the centerpiece of discussion, and while arguments occur, none escalate to the point where silverware is used as weaponry like in the old days. This is the new ordinary and it will continue to be so until the next crisis that drives them apart.

After dessert the whole family goes outside and sits on the steps, looking down and their hand-drawn reflection of the sky above, pointing out their favorite parts, and give mild praise for everyone's work. The hot wind blows.

It's just as saccharine as it seems.

And maybe it is ordinary.

But on this humid summer night, just for a few fleeting moments, it feels anything but.

Chapter End Notes

- The Swedish War of Liberation lasted between 1521-1523 and in of 1524 Sweden became fully independent from Denmark and the Kalmar Union was dissolved. I had some difficulty trying to pinpoint where to date when it's already hinted that Sweden and Finland will eventually leave but I eventually decided on early 1523 because at that point forces who were pro-Swedish independent were gaining power and would take over Sweden and claim Finland later that year. In general, it's a little tough to line up historical events with human drama of human nations like this because history doesn't just all of a sudden change all at once and things are so drawn out.

There's the whole "accuracy for the sake of story" and "creative license for the sake of story" debacle here, and while both are important you sometimes have to lean to one side over the other. There's a lot of potential to be written about there, the differences between historical events and how nations feel about them, and how these events feel when finalizing treaties might take a long time, or when shifts in borders and titles are vague and slow changing rather than distinct moments. It's a really neat idea to explore, one I don't have time to do properly here or within this story, but I'd be interested to see other people take a crack at it (and if anyone writes anything on this topic I'd love to read it).

A Handful of Shattered Chapters

I. Social Disfigurement

[1921]

When Henrik passes him by without so much as a hello, Eduard doesn't think anything of it, perhaps he's busy, as many nations are. Europe has been shaken, there's still messes to clean up after the war, and Denmark is but an old, burnt out kingdom. The way Henrik looks reflects that: he's older now at least by a few years, the brightness of his hair has faded, and while he's taller he doesn't fill the room in the same way as he used to. Different, but not unknowable—Henrik's face is one that's hard to forget.

He tries not to take it personally when they pass each other again, again, again, without greeting. Maybe it's the new glasses? His hairstyle has changed to reflect the times, cut in a modern style, so is it that? Maybe Eduard just isn't important for the time being—there's more important things at hand than talking to him, maybe that he could stomach—but it doesn't seem right. The newly created state of Estonia, now officially given the international approval of being a nation by law, had once belonged to Denmark, he and Henrik had spent years together, so how could he not say anything?

“Henrik,” he taps him on the shoulder. He turns, with a noise of inquiry and an empty, questioning stare.

“It's me,” Eduard hesitates after getting no response.

“Sorry,” a furrowed brow, a confused eyebrow. “Who?”

Surely, he's not forgotten. Surely, he's not unknowable. Apart from Denmark for many years, yes, but they've crossed paths so many times, and still Henrik looks at him like a stranger. He isn't even looking at him like he's a nation, he has that same distant stare all nations get when they deal with their underlings to help them sort papers and keep an itinerary together.

“Oh... Eduard!” it takes Henrik an uncomfortable minute to finally get it. “You look so different, you're almost unrecognizable. My bad, I've been really exhausted lately. Nice job on getting statehood!”

Even if it was an accident, even if they both laugh it off, it doesn't feel right. There's a pit in Eduard's stomach that he can't be rid of, like an invisible void.

“You're almost unrecognizable.”

Those words echo in his head the next time he looks at himself in the mirror.

The gaping space will only continue to grow in the face of future wars.

II. Starvation / Lying Breach

[1887]

It's a hunger that Halvard can't seem to satisfy no matter what he does.

He writes letter after letter to his brother and gets replies, then fewer, and then nothing as the years go by. He rereads the ones he did get, with childish writing and simple misspellings and the mental image of Henrik teaching him how to write longer words, how to spell new phrases, moments that Halvard wishes he was there for, and it makes him ache.

I need to go see him, he keeps telling himself every morning, he keeps telling Berwald every night, planning and trying to manipulate government work to allow him to visit Denmark, to go to Iceland, to go anywhere where he has a chance of catching a glimpse of him. But he goes to Iceland while Jóhannes runs away from home in Copenhagen, he goes to Denmark while Jóhannes is sailing back to Reykjavik, he tries and tries and tries but they keep missing each other. All he has is the moments where he comes back to Henrik's house and stands in the doorway of his little brother's room, imagining what his world must be like, how he must feel about all of this, and how badly Halvard misses him. He wants to stay here, but he has to leave.

"You'll see 'im soon enough," Berwald tells him, letting a glimmer of hope momentarily sparkle. He brushes Halvard's hair and holds him close on the nights where Halvard feels especially lonely, but Berwald can't rid Halvard of the overwhelming desire to touch his brother's face again. He can be affectionate all he wants, but Berwald knows his love can't replace Jóhannes.

"Next year, just wait," he lies, muttering hypothetical miracles into Halvard's ear as they curl up around each other.

The next year, it's the same conversation, and Berwald patches up the wound by lying and giving out affection again, carefully weaving his words in and around the new tear like a needle and thread.

"I know you're lying," Halvard tells him one day when they wake up next to each other. "You don't know if I'll see my brother again."

"When," Berwald corrects.

"No," Halvard shakes his head. "If. But I want you to keep lying to me, anyway."

Halvard's frustration reaches a new all time high and Berwald comes home to him smashing dishes against the floor in pure anger that nothing he does brings him any closer to a world in which he's content with the way things are. He fights with Berwald and tries to scream but his voice gets caught in his throat. Berwald accuses him of many things, but it's the accusation that he's not understanding how complicated everything is that sends Halvard running out of their home, deciding to walk back to Norway all by himself regardless of what his officials say, that he will carve his own path and he will find his brother. He's found and dragged back to Stockholm anyway. He tells Berwald of course he knows how complicated everything is, of course he knows their freedom will always be limited, that it hurt him when Berwald said that to him. He knows, he understands, but it makes him angry. He's angry when he's dragged by five officials and thrown on Berwald's doorstep. He's angry when his requests keep getting denied. He's angry, and then he's just apathetic. The dream of escape fades.

He wants the truth in all things, he says.

But he keeps asking to be lied to about Jóhannes.

It's just one more year.

The hunger grows.

III. The Birth of a Coping Mechanism

[1957]

He's in his usual place, in the back of the car, separated and yet so close.

Jóhannes closes his eyes and curls himself up against the window, resting uncomfortably against it. It's a long drive to Berwald's country home and he's still tired from his journey to the mainland. Henrik and Halvard talk about things he doesn't want to intrude upon, they are topics that don't concern him, he has no input he thinks is worthwhile to share, and he's sure his voice would be drowned out anyway by the crunching of the road underneath them.

"Do you think he's asleep?" Henrik asks.

His eyelids are heavy but he's very much awake.

"Jói," Halvard purrs. "Are you awake?"

Jóhannes decides not to answer.

It's a decision that he regrets.

He regrets it because he overhears things he shouldn't. Halvard brings up memories of the past, terrifying memories of events Jóhannes knew nothing about, things that Jóhannes is pretty sure he shouldn't never know about, things he overhears with the words "I don't want Jóhannes knowing" tacked on casually to the end of sentences. Henrik pours out his own secrets, deconstructing the lies that Jóhannes had believed to be true, lies that were told to prevent Jóhannes from knowing uncomfortable truths about his family, about his friends. The bedrock is shaken, crumbling, revealing that the construction and the images that Jóhannes had formed of his brother, of Henrik, of Berwald, of Tino, of everyone he considered close, all of it was much uglier than he thought.

He's supposed to be asleep. He's not supposed to know what awful, awful people they've been, what awful people they might still be, what unforgivable sins they've committed towards each other. Life is brutal, Jóhannes knows that, but it's another thing to know that the people close to you are brimming with choices that have not been okay, that they've been forced into traumatic situations that still burn hot in their minds, that your loved ones have not been good and have had ungoodness thrust upon them.

He wishes he could delete this conversation from mind, that maybe if he closes his eyes hard enough that he'll no longer hear the voice of Halvard crack and break under the pressure of bringing up moments in his life that he's never been freed from, that he won't have to hear him try to hold back his tears as he drives. He won't have to hear Henrik cry through gritted teeth and tell himself that he has to be quiet so he doesn't wake his son, his son, who should know nothing of this pain, the son he wants to protect from the same sadness they've had, the same son who is cowering in the backseat from all of this overheard nonsense.

He could pretend to wake up, but that means having to face speaking to them, to put on his pokerface and lie that he's been clueless this whole time. He doesn't think he can do it, he thinks

he'll be found out, and what would he do if he was confronted, what would happen if they find out that he knows everything? He could hurl himself out of the car and break most of his bones, maybe death would save him from a week of questioning, but he'd come back, he'd still have to deal with it, he'd still have to confront the truth.

It's better to remain sleeping, he thinks.

He's shell-shocked by the time they get to Sweden. He can't look anyone in the eye for days. It's not fair, it's just not fair.

The moment he discovers that portable music exists, that he can clamp headphones over his ears and drown out the world with the sugarcoated words of pop princesses telling him that all is fine, he doesn't hesitate. Cassette tapes, CDs, and megabytes on his phone, he's cycled through all of them. If something seems off, if he doesn't feel comfortable listening to harmless idle conversation, if the memory of that day pops up behind his eyes and replays every summer on the way to Berwald's, he can shut down and shut it out.

I don't want to hear.

I don't want to hear.

Please, I can't cope with these things that I'm not supposed to know.

Movement

[half a year before the vacation]

The phone rings while Jóhannes is moving a heavy box and he grumbles a little bit at the noise. He puts it down, makes his way over to his phone playing jingly music on the counter, assumes it's from his government asking an unnecessary question, and answers accordingly, with a hint of disdain.

“Hello?” booms a deep voice, one that Jóhannes instantly recognizes as **not** another official asking him if he has time to chat over lunch, but Berwald, quiet on the other line after his greeting. In the background he can hear Tino talking loudly to someone else and loud clattering on the other end of the line.

“Hi, I wasn't expecting a call from you,” Jóhannes blinks, “is something wrong?”

“No, nothin', just wanted to see how things are goin'.”

“Fine. You caught me in the middle of moving stuff into my new apartment.”

He hears Berwald relay the information to Tino, who shrieks something along the lines of ‘he's moving?!’ loud enough for Jóhannes to hear muffled through the receiver. Tino launches a series of questions. Ask him why he's moving, ask him if he needs help, ask him why he didn't tell us, but Berwald chuckles and says that Jóhannes is old enough to make his own choices and unless he directly asks for it, there's no need for such a fuss.

“Though,” Berwald adds, “I am makin' cookies right now. Your favorite, incidentally. I'll send you some.”

“I'll only give you my new address as long as you promise to not show up unannounced with everyone like the *last* time I moved.”

“It wasn't me who decided to do that. Secret's safe, Jói.”

“Only because I love those cookies so much.”

Berwald puts the phone down on the counter after taking his address, switching it to speakerphone so Jóhannes can hear the full chaos of his household while he mixes batter and globs perfectly round portions onto a baking pan. He can distinctly hear Tino's voice now, trying to teach his dog how to do a new trick, and the sound of two pairs of feet running back and forth across the kitchen as Peter and Nils play some sort of game that Jóhannes can't figure out the rules to. It's a homey sound, one where he can close his eyes and imagine himself there, leaning back on the counter while he licks leftover batter out of the bowl. He too, puts his phone on speaker, resuming the process of moving labeled boxes to their correct rooms and screwing his minimal furniture back together. The speaker isn't as clear as he wants it to be, but the sounds of Berwald's house fill his undecorated apartment and makes it feel whole. Does Berwald hear the clicking and twisting of his screwdriver on the other line? The clanking of wooden table legs as he fits them together? The breath of effort he gives as he picks up one end of his couch and slides it to its proper place?

The two way connection, one without weight, makes him feel at ease.

“Can I talk to you about something,” he asks, switching the phone back so that only he can hear, “if it’s possible?”

“Just me?”

“Tino, too.”

“Mhm, sec.”

Berwald hardly has to convince his children to go outside, they both can sense when members of the elder five want to discuss something privately, so they just nod, decide they’ll walk to the park to continue their game, hug their parents goodbye, and immediately, the air shifts.

“What’s up?” Tino prompts.

“Promise not to tell Henrik or Halle?”

“Promise,” two voices speak in unison.

“It’s just, there’s some things that are easier to say to you two than them.”

“It’s fine,” Berwald nods, “you aren’t obligated to tell ‘em everything if you don’t want to.”

“That’s the thing, I don’t know *how* to tell them anything, and I *want* to. I can’t even tell them that I care about them most of the time.”

“If we were human,” Tino hums, “then I would tell you that you should tell people you love them before it’s too late, because you’ll never know when the world will take that ability away from you. We aren’t human. We have the luxury of not telling others things for lifespans and death isn’t an obstacle for us. We can still be taken away, removed from each other’s contact, but the we’ll always come together with each other again, at some point, so long as we exist. Time isn’t your enemy, you don’t have to race to confess anything, Jóhannes.”

“I want to, though, soon. But it’s hard.”

“I never said it was easy.”

The oven timer goes off.

“Sorry,” Berwald scrambles.

“It makes me feel less tense, actually,” Jóhannes softly laughs. “I know what I want to say to both of them. I know that they won’t react negatively, they both love me too much. I’m scared, though, that something will go wrong, that I’ll chicken out halfway through, that it just won’t feel right, even after I say it. That I’ll choose the wrong time to say it. That it’ll still make me feel empty.”

“Is the continuing anxiety of sitting on your thoughts worth it? That’s what you need to ask yourself.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Then I think you know what you need to do.”

“I think I knew before you even called.”

“You know, we’re proud of you, too.”

“Mhm, ‘s hard to do these kinds of things.”

“This is just embarrassing!” Jóhannes wails in anguish, feeling his cheeks turn red, “I can’t do this anymore! Thanks! Mail me cookies! I love you! Bye!” And he ends the call, slamming the phone on a cardboard box and lays down, face planted on the floor, for half an hour, grumbling.

When he finally gets up, he decides to take a long walk through Reykjavik and thinks, deeply, without headphones, so he can absorb the sounds of the city and lose the warmth in his toes.

Heart to Heart

One morning, two days before the end of the trip, when he's tying the laces of his boots together, Jóhannes feels a firm tap on his shoulder. It's Henrik, a grin spreading across his face, who asks him if he'd like to accompany him fishing.

"If not, that's fine too," Henrik nods.

To his surprise, Jóhannes accepts.

Over top the glittery water, on the edge of the wooden pier, they sit side by side with a tackle box between them, Henrik humming and Jóhannes silent, still. It's the younger who catches the first fish, flopping and thrashing until Jóhannes pulls it up and holds it in his hands. He carefully, gingerly, unhooks the fish and returns it back to the green depths of the lake where it swims away.

"You're very kind," Henrik says.

"Shut up," is his response, but it's soft, he doesn't mean it.

"Would you rather feed the fish instead of catching them?"

"Kinda. I get enough of my fill fishing back home."

So they break off tiny pieces of bait and throw them into the water, watching the fish come up close to the surface to fight over each other, their scales glistening and smooth. Ducks come, circling around the bend, and the eventually lure the birds over too.

"I'm surprised they aren't scared," Henrik muses, throwing bits of food. "They aren't city birds, y'know."

"Maybe they're just used to us being here in the summertime."

"Maybe."

They sit there until the sun is high overhead without conversation deviating from the animals beneath their feet.

In the middle of the afternoon, after a walk alone through the fields, Jóhannes finds the cabin empty aside from Henrik sitting on the couch, lounging messily with his eyes half-closed and a crushed can on the tabletop in front of him.

"Hey," Henrik waves, then gestures to the can. "Do you mind getting me another out of the fridge?"

"Yeah, sure. Where is everyone?"

"They went to go see if they can find that huge tree that Tino found three years ago. I imagine they'll be gone for a while."

Jóhannes hesitates when opening the fridge, grabbing one can, closing it, and then standing there looking at the bare white door. He opens it again, taking another out, and walks over to where Henrik waits, standing behind him with the two cans chilling his hands. He thinks about what Tino told him, about how he doesn't have to rush things, that there will be other summers, other vacations, other calls where he'll hang up halfway through the phone ringing. Even if war breaks out tomorrow, even if the ocean washes them away to different shores for fifty years, in all likelihood Denmark will still be standing, perhaps weaker than before, but alive, and Jóhannes could still tell Henrik his final secrets.

But he doesn't want to tell the truth to Henrik after conflict, he doesn't want sit on Denmark's death bed and whisper what he wants Henrik to know moments before the old, old kingdom parts from this earth. He doesn't even know if Henrik will ever give up his nationhood, if he'll ever die, his kind smile and fiery hair suggests that the old flame will never burn out, just alighting new torches along the path of life.

He could wait, until next summer, or the next, or the next, endless years blurring together in forgetfulness as time goes on. But he reminds himself of the words he's written inside his notebook, the poetry he's composed, of the simple action of not being afraid to allow things to change, to understand that they do, to know that sometimes everything can only begin with hesitant determination, to be terrified but do it anyway. He winces in preparation.

He takes a deep breath.

"... Dad?"

A name that Henrik hasn't been called in a long, long time. He cranes his neck around to look at Jóhannes with a kind of surprised awe, who is standing with his feet together and shoulders folded in, small and nervousness evident on his face.

"Yeah?" is all Henrik can come up with to say.

"... Can we talk?"

"Always," he pats the seat next to him, moving over. Jóhannes hands him the can, cradling his own in his hands before opening it. They sit, as silent as they were this morning, taking sips where there should be conversation. Henrik breaks it first, asking him what he wanted to say.

"I," he pauses, "I don't know how to word this exactly."

"Take all the time you need."

He lets out a huff and falls to the side, leaning against Henrik's shoulder.

"I missed you," he says, after a while, fumbling with his hands. "I've never told you that before, but I did, and I still do."

Jóhannes explains that he's missed the years where they shared a home, just the two of them, Henrik making faces and telling jokes across the table to cheer him up, the late night talks they had side by side, the attention he was given and the effort that Henrik went through to try and make him happy. There was aspects that he could live without, moments with Henrik that consisted of them shouting at each other and Jóhannes sending his tiny fists into Henrik's chest out of frustration and anger, those, those he wanted to leave behind. But the good that was there, the bond

that two lonely people damaged by their histories shared, that was something that Jóhannes missed dearly.

“It’s mostly my fault, and I’m sorry,” he continues, “I’ve the one who has been mistrusting and distant, dismissive and maladaptive, continually.”

“You were hurt and afraid when you left.” Henrik wraps a shoulder around him, “I don’t blame you for it at all, Jói, you’re forgiven.”

“Still, I’m sorry. I’ve never said thank you to you for all the things that you did when I lived with you. So, thank you.”

“But I couldn’t fix your problems.”

“You still tried. You tried your hardest, and I was once mad at you. I thought you were to blame for everything, that you were trying to hurt me, that it was your fault that Halle went away, that I couldn’t go to Iceland, that I was stuck here. But now that I’m older, I think I understand that there was so much that wasn’t in your control, that everything you did was out of love, and it was *I* that was the problem, *I* wasn’t receptive, *I* didn’t get it. What were you supposed to do? There wasn’t much you could do. But you tried to help me in any way you knew how, and I never told you that I’m grateful that you put up with me, that you tried, even if I didn’t react well.”

“You’re my kid,” Henrik says, “I’d do anything within my power to move the world for you.”

“I know. You’ve been a good father to me. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Henrik brushes Jóhannes’ hair aside and kisses him on the cheek gently, an act of affection that Jóhannes doesn’t run from, doesn’t protest. “All that Halle and I have ever wanted for you is for you to be happy. That’s still all we want, to not have the same pains that we’ve suffered.”

"You know, I get you and Halle, but I also don't."

“Hmm?”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you this for a while, too. I don’t think... that it’s possible for me to fall in love the same way as you two, that’s something that I’ve never felt, it’s something that I don’t want to feel. But I worry that people won’t understand me, or get it.”

“Jóhannes, nobody will ever, truly, understand anybody. I don’t get why Halle gets excited over pieces of fallen bark on our walks and brings them home and stares at them for hours, but I know it makes him happy. When Berwald is working on furniture and he hammers his hand on accident, I know that it hurt and I wince too, even if it didn’t happen to me. If Tino gushes over some new band that I don’t like, I’ll still listen and nod when he tells me about it even if I don’t feel anything for it. Even if I can’t imagine what you feel exactly, even if your orientation isn’t the same as mine, I can respect it, I can support it. If you fall in love in other ways, if you don’t, if things change, if they don’t, it doesn’t matter to me because all I care about is whether or not you’re content with the way you are, as long as you are happy. Are you okay?”

He prods Jóhannes, who is hiding his face behind his hands, still leaning against Henrik but crumpled. There’s a delayed, weak noise of affirmation, followed by a heaving sob that is quickly swallowed.

“C’mon, let it out.”

“It’s just, a lot, at once, off my chest, all of this, and I’m glad,” Jóhannes says, removing his hands and twisting back towards Henrik, leaning into his chest to wet the front of Henrik’s shirt with his tears, who embraces him with a gentle hand on his back, in much the same way he used to rock him back to sleep after waking from nightmares.

When the water starts drying up, Henrik does his best to make him laugh with bad puns and jokes that are half-funny, but Jóhannes laughs anyway, wiping the last tears from his eyes, smiling, and asks if they could go out onto the dock again, resting their legs in the water, emptying cans while continuing to talk in the sunlight with fish nipping at their toes.

Jóhannes' Untitled Poem No. 4

Down by the sea
I was born
Next to a bundle of netting and an old violin belonging to my fathers
Amidst the cries of all the gulls resting on our roof
I took my first breath and wailed with them
“To cry is to know you are still living”
So was said to me on my 5th birthday
For nobody cries in Heaven

Down by the sea
I was raised
To be like those scavenging birds
Collecting driftwood and rocks in my sunburnt hands
Lips cracking, I prayed for rain
And for time to pass me quickly by
So that I may grow older
And join my elders
In their glass bottomed fishing boat

Down by the sea
I was shocked
To discover love is more complex than it is spoken of
I laid down on the bottom
Of the glass bottom fishing boat
Watched the colorful world below the sea
And longed for it to be mine
For a single pane of glass is only a border
And marriage is just a word

Down by the sea
I now know
That the colors of the ocean are not mine to hold
Nor do I want them to color my life
For I was created by omens from screaming seabirds
And it is with them in the sky where I belong
I leave the glass bottomed fishing boat behind me
Weave feathers between gaps in my hair
And pursue in flight the beauty of the sky

I am the ghost of both my fathers
I am the son of the deep dark raven
I am lonely and starving and lost
I am lovely and speaking and found

I will dip my black feathers wet
Lay my body on the nightly sea
Feel the warmth of those around me
And while I may not understand
While I may not know this love

While my wings will shear the skies instead of fins the sea below

I am love

For black is the color that absorbs all

Black is the color of loving all

I am love

Because I am loved

And love is me

#Þórðargleði

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[2014]

It's not all work, it's not all pain, no, it isn't.

As a nation, you must travel, you will travel, both within your own country and abroad. Trips might not take months to complete now—going from one end of the earth to another is much easier today—but spending hours sitting on the floor of an airport, stranded on the other side of the world because of the weather or a mechanical failure will certainly be an agonizing delay. Buses will be late, trains shut down, and of course you run out of battery on your cell phone when you really need it. It's not like you need to call home though—your friends and family are probably catching last minute flights and running frantically to board the last subway car just the same as you are. They lead the same frantic life as you, returning home tired and jet-lagged and wishing for a long vacation spent at home.

But there are perks of traveling as part of your job. You get to see all sorts of new places without paying for it. If you want to explore, coming a day early or staying a day late is easily negotiated.

Sometimes, it's unintentional. You miss your flight due to human error and the next one isn't until tomorrow. So you take advantage of this freedom and explore around you instead of sleeping on uncomfortable seats or playing the same card games you've been playing for years on the airport floor. You decide to leave instead of staying.

“Where are we going?” Jóhannes asks as he hurries alongside Halvard, pulling his rolling suitcase over a bump in the tile.

“The ocean,” he replies, the phrase nearly drowned out by a looped announcement by airport security booming over the loudspeakers. Halvard rents a car for the day. He puts sunglasses on. He flies down the highway with Jóhannes in the passenger's seat, heading east from the bustling city under the humid, blinding skies of Florida in the midsummer.

Halvard ditches his shirt in the car, stripping down to his shorts. Jóhannes doesn't, but he does remove his shoes and slips his headphones on over his ears. The sand is hot under their feet. The water is refreshingly cool. The sun shines despite threats of afternoon storms to the north. They walk south.

At first Jóhannes follows behind him, his smaller feet stepping into the imprint of Halvard's footprints on the soft sand, single file and flawless, but they soon grow out of sync as Halvard drifts closer and closer to the water's edge, the sea churning up white foam that Halvard kicks at, coating his feet with clusters of bubbles. He slows, Jóhannes walks ahead, and then it is his feet that become the model for Halvard's faint footsteps.

The taste of ocean and rotting seaweed burns their nostrils like acid, like the scent of drying fish baking in the summer sun, but as nations perpetually tied to the sea, this smell, undesirable to many, reminds them of home. Iceland and Norway would not be what they are without their ties to the water and Halvard would not be Halvard and Jóhannes not Jóhannes without memories of being

rocked to sleep on the wild sea and the smell of decay.

The beat of music keeps Jóhannes on a rhythm, only able to hear the sound of crashing and churning of the water if he ventures close to where the white waves crash, the occasional gull shrieking as it fights over a caught fish with another bird over their heads, but to him the world is profoundly musical, artificial, constructed around what he thinks rather than what is. Halvard's lips move as he shuffles in front of Jóhannes and turns over a fragmented seashell with his foot—revealing the underside the color of pearly snow stained with deep purples—but even though his eyes follow the vibrations of Halvard's lips, he can't understand him, he can only assume he is explaining the find through heavy-lidded eyes and commenting on the color. Halvard knows that Jóhannes probably can't hear him, and yet he speaks anyway, soft words, words Jóhannes can invent and edit as much as he pleases without ever knowing whether or not he's right or wrong.

And perhaps Halvard is better for Jóhannes this way, just a piece of his life no different from a doll, a character, someone Jóhannes can project his own will onto rather than a person who is flawed, chaotic, inhuman and yet so very. There's no disappointment here, they are on different plains of being, lines that occasionally intersect as Jóhannes points out a crab or Halvard turns over more shells with his toes and their unevenly cut nails, but again they separate, Halvard taking the path closer to the shore and the hem of his shorts turning dark with seawater while Jóhannes struggles over uneven sand.

Halvard takes the lead again, standing in the distance, still and poised like a heron with a neck craning down above the water. The water recedes and he pounces, using his hands like shovels to scoop out sand mixed with shell fragments and shifting the wet glop between his fingers until he filters through and finds what he's looking for. On the next wave, he fills his cupped hands with water, and by that point Jóhannes is close enough to take Halvard's non-verbal invitation to peer into the round world that he holds in his hands.

Among the sandy grains flecking the mountains and valleys of his folded palms sits a large sand crab, a being that moles itself into the wet ground between every wave. Halvard shifts his fingers, prompting the gray-shelled creature to pulsate its limbs and whizz around the planet of water that Halvard has created. Grains of sand fly, shell bits pulverized by the waves glitter as they catch in the sunlight, and who knows how many tiny, minuscule microorganisms get spun upside down as the sand crab flips and settles again. Another wave comes, Halvard dips his hands into the rushing water and stretches his fingers out, letting everything go, and as the water retreats again they watch hundreds of the crabs of various sizes bury themselves from the harshness of the ocean. It must be hard, to spend your days shielding yourself from the ebb and flow and unkindness of the world, Jóhannes thinks, but then he realizes that most people do the exact same.

Shorebirds plove along, inserting their pointed bills into the sand and running to and from shore so that they will not be snatched up by the arms of the sea and dragged away. Some of these birds Jóhannes recognizes—they are same birds grace his shores far to the northwest—others are a mystery, ones he hasn't seen in all his years of living.

And he counts himself blessed, in a way. It's a curse, he sometimes thinks, to be burdened with the hearts of humans, to feel and see all the horrors of the world, but here on the sandy shores of a different country, in a place he's never been before, he's happy. He's over a thousand now and yet there's so much of the world he hasn't seen, there's languages he cannot speak, poetry he cannot understand, dense jungles and dry wastelands and cities and villages by the thousands that he's never been to. Maybe someday he'll see it all, but the earth constantly changes, humanity invents new technology and ways of thinking faster than he'll ever be able to catch up to. It'll never be enough. He'll never be enough to engulf it all. But how wonderful a thought that is, he thinks, that

there's still so much unknown, as he sways in the breeze and spins around on the sand on a pointed toe like a dancer.

Halvard drifts out to sea, the water calls to him, and he steps out into the open ocean until the water comes up to his waist. Jóhannes decides to sit, to curl his toes around dry sand and enjoy the view. A single finger etches lines, disrupting the flow of sand by cutting molehills into two, as Halvard dives underneath an incoming wave to avoid being swept back to shore, shearing through it with his strong shoulders pulled forward.

But he gets distracted by something in the water—probably a fish, Jóhannes assumes—and as his curiosity trumps the fear of danger, a particularly powerful wave pulls him backwards and sweeps him off his feet, crashing his entire body down into the sand under the water. For a while, all Jóhannes sees is a foot or two kicking in vain and Halvard trying to right himself. He pops up in shallower water, hair soaked and the pins that held his hair back missing with a look of surprise, irritation, and resignation in the fact that he deserved the ocean's torment. He coughs and Jóhannes quietly laughs from shore. He wants to capture this moment somehow, this moment where Halvard is foolish.

It takes him a while to figure out what to say, what to write for his friends to see on social media, and after rewriting and deleting full messages and partial sentences over and over again, he settles on a single hashtag. #Þórðargleði, he writes, and takes a picture of the ocean in front of him, flecked with the golden dot of Halvard's hair, a series blurred pixels as he submerges himself once more. It's not something anyone will understand, and maybe he'll get some probing questions about what he means, but he expects that the post will go unanswered, unnoticed, overlooked. Jóhannes stands up and moves on. He doesn't look behind him until the moment that he turns around and heads back from which he came. Halvard is still waiting—lurking amongst seafoam and bobbing seaweed—and he climbs out of the water to meet him, walking alongside him, droplets pitter pattering from his body onto the ground below.

With the pins gone and Halvard's side-part undone, with it hanging evenly and heavy with water, the two brothers look similar, just differences in the details. They look at each other while walking. Halvard can't see Jóhannes' eyes through the tint of his sunglasses but they still lock gaze, mouths blank. Halvard offers up a small smile, one that hints of sheepishness, of kindness, that he's unsure if the receiver is feeling the same warmhearted feelings of summer as the giver. He is. Jóhannes smiles back, wider, but not far enough to show the whites of his teeth. It's a rare moment for them both.

They look away from each other. Their fingertips brush by each other once or twice but never make full contact.

As the sun falls they drive around the barrier island with the windows rolled all the way down, Halvard playing the radio loudly as the wind dries his hair and Jóhannes leaning out the window, content, headphones hanging around his neck.

The stars come out. They drive back inland. Halvard turns off the radio and Jóhannes turns it back on. They wake up early to catch a flight to Europe and part without words or ritual in the airport terminal to catch another plane that will return them to their respective homelands. Halvard looks behind him as Jóhannes walks away, wondering if he should say something, but he doesn't. Jóhannes turns around a minute later but his brother has disappeared amongst the mass of people.

He's gone, until the next time around.

Chapter End Notes

-Sand crabs (also called mole crabs) are distinctly different from regular crabs. If you google "emerita mole crab" you'll see what kind of animal is.

-Þórðargleði (literally Þórður's joy) is similar to the German word schadenfreude (although the words developed independently of each other) which means “taking pleasure from the misfortune of others.” It also happens to be a used hashtag on twitter.

A CASE STUDY: SENDLINGUR OG SANDLÓA

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

SENDLINGUR – The Icelandic word for *Calidris maritima*, a bird known as the Purple Sandpiper in English.

(One of the most wonderful things about living is the idea of perspective. Your view is, and will always be, different from how others perceive those very same things. By extension, your own perception of yourself is, without a doubt, different than the way others view you. You, as a person, see your hands and feet and the tip of your nose if you squint closely enough, but you do not go through most of your life viewing your own face. Maybe that's why sometimes we don't recognize our own faces in the mirror or feel our voice is a crude representation of how we think we actually sound.)

OG – The Icelandic word for linking two things together: and.

(Artists use perspective, too. You can paint the same picture a million times, each from a different perspective, and it would be unique every time. A lively party looks dull when you can only see the bottoms of people's shoes. Someone, in the same moment, can be seen both as the villain and as the victim depending on the way it is portrayed. There is great power that comes from manipulating perspective. You can argue that there is no such thing as true truth because you cannot view the world with true objectiveness. Even the language of your thoughts is dictated by those around you and the language you speak.)

SANDLÓA– Another Icelandic word for a bird. *Charadrius hiaticula*, otherwise called the Ringed Plover.

(If somebody else wrote the exact same story that you're reading now, even if the content stayed the same, the words used to move the plot along would be different. People have their own ways of telling things. It's been said that all stories have already been written centuries ago, it's just the way things are said and the names of the characters that changes.)

THEREFORE, SENDLINGUR OG SANDLÓA: Purple Sandpiper and Ringed Plover.

SEE ALSO: A song by the Icelandic band Múgsefjun, telling a love story of reuniting and separating between these two birds, one who remains on Iceland's black shores while the other crosses the ocean in search of a life elsewhere, year after year.

(Jóhannes views himself as the Sendlingur, the bird who stays put every year and longs for the return of the Sandlóa. He views his life as one of waiting, one of being planted, and he isn't wrong.

But in Halvard's eyes, Jóhannes is the Sandlóa and he's the Sendlingur. Halvard has felt trapped by the wheels of fate and it was his brother who flew in circles around him, missing for years only to come back briefly before taking off across the sea. Halvard firmly believes this to still be true even in this time of travel and freedom.

You see? Perspective.

And by that very nature, Henrik and Halvard are also the Sendlingur and Sandlóa. And Henrik and Jóhannes. Or perhaps the elder two are the birds and Jóhannes is but a conjunction that exists between them. And, and, and. The list goes on and on, with countless people and endless names with a sentence that can be reversed and rearranged even though it is but three words. The same framework, just adjusted. The same birds, just another year. The same story, just different.

Of meeting and parting, over and over again.

Loving, then losing, then loving again, like the cycle of the seasons, like the orbital this planet spins on, and not unlike the stationary Purple Sandpiper and migratory Ringed Plover, destined to care for each other only through brief passing, forever and ever.

The Sendlingur and Sandlóa are whoever you want them to be.

You're always both of them yourself.)

Chapter End Notes

I'll be talking more about some details of this story and why I wrote it once I finish it (there's going to be some extended author's notes at the end), but the song Sendlingur og Sandlóa (and the album it is on as a whole) was the original spark that led this story to be written. I highly suggest you give it a listen (and also support the band by buying it if you like the song, I love Múgsefjun and would love a third album).

The World is Nothing More Than A Wide Open Prison, Act 1

[Copenhagen, 1890]

It's been okay.

It is no longer one of those weeks where Henrik drinks too much at night and Jóhannes has to drag him out of bed to get ready for work, standing on his tiptoes, making breakfast for the both of them, staring at their half-eaten plates in the quiet guilt that comes with being a less than perfect parent and a less than perfect child. It's not the month of howling frost where Henrik tries to get Jóhannes to speak to him from across the fireside—but the only glint in Jóhannes' eyes is of silent rage, a rebellious spark that gazes at the roaring logs crackling in the hearth of Henrik's home, wondering how satisfying it would be to bring this all down in flames.

Instead, it's the late spring. Flowers are blooming. By the light of the growing day they sit cross-legged in the park, pulling up handfuls of grass and throwing them at each other with trickling laughter.

"I wonder if we could dye your hair green with grass," Henrik wonders, displaying his large palms face open so that Jóhannes can see the stains on his skin. "Wouldn't that be fun?"

"I'd rather dye yours."

"Maybe we should try together, then?"

"Someday, sure."

(Not all promises are remembered, are fulfilled, but this one is. On a day, far from this one, the nation of Iceland will temporarily be the color of deep green forests obscured by shadow and Denmark awash with the dark purples and pinks of sunrise.)

They stand up. Henrik holds out his fingers. Jóhannes takes them. They walk hand in hand for a while, Jóhannes becomes tired, Henrik picks him up and carries him on his back. Tiny hands grasp the budding leaves hanging overhead, letting the waxy texture slide across his fingertips. From so high up, higher than even Henrik himself sees, the world looks different, so strange. What must it like to be so tall and to gaze down at everything below you? The grass is no longer within reach, the puddles on the ground won't wet the bottoms of his shoes, but there is joy up here, lacing his fingers within Henrik's thick hair and pretending that he's flying. Is this what it feels like to be a god? To be above it all, to have warmth beneath you, to feel as if you have a higher place in this world? But, as Jóhannes points his chin upwards, raising a hand to shield himself from the light, the trees are higher still, the clouds are above that, and beyond lies the deep vastness of space. If nations are a step above humanity, what monster lurks on the lonely staircases above the nations, if anything? It must be hard, Jóhannes thinks, if such a being exists. It's hard to be alone.

Henrik, crouching down slowly to examine some yellow flowers, bring his thoughts back down to earth.

"Should we take some home, do you think?" Henrik asks.

"No, let them continue to grow where they belong."

Dinner is pleasant. They play chess. Jóhannes still hasn't beat him and that won't change tonight, no matter how many games they play. Henrik spoils him with late night dessert. Jóhannes is tucked into bed, he doesn't protest one bit when Henrik reads him a story even though Jóhannes already knows it by heart and he feels he is far too old to be read to. The blankets are cool in the warm air. The moon is yellow, hanging heavy and sagging deeply like his eyelids. Jóhannes falls asleep, wondering if this upcoming summer will be the one he's been waiting for, when he'll see his brother again. Maybe this is the summer that the three of them will stand in the same room once more. His dreams are comforting, and in them he can see images of Halvard, strong and proud, smiling fondly and laughing.

In the hours close to daybreak, when the sky drags the poor moon down, there's a knock on the door that Henrik, sleepless, answers.

He is woken by the sound of wood knocking against wood and the rustling of fabric—uncommon things to awake to that make him rub his heavy eyes and squint to find the cause. There's a shadow, back facing him, that he can barely make out in the dim light. Clack. Rustling. Clack. More rustling. Something isn't right.

“Henrik?” Jóhannes asks, in a quiet voice.

Henrik jumps, pauses, turning his head slowly so that the outline of his face is visible. He's frowning, making no attempt to hide his displeasure, but it's not just disgust—sadness, worry, there is true fear in his eyes that makes Jóhannes freeze like a frightened rabbit, still in the headlights of what is about to come.

However, the impact doesn't strike him. Henrik turns his back and continues his frantic searching, rummaging through drawers and pulling things out of them. He's packing, Jóhannes realizes, sliding out of bed quietly, pulling the sheets around his body with him to keep him warm, protected. He utters the name of his father again.

Henrik finally sighs, his shoulders rising and sinking, higher and deeper, than Jóhannes has ever seen them before. He turns around, kneeling down low and placing his palms on Jóhannes' tiny shoulders. It's serious.

“You're going home,” Henrik says, very, very slowly. “Back to Iceland.”

“Okay...?”

“Jóhannes. It's not like the last times, when you've come back here. They want you to go home, for good, immediately, with no delay, they decided last night without telling me. You deserve the right to live in your homeland, and maybe this is what is right to do, but you're still so young and Iceland is so far away. And I wish it wasn't like this.”

“Why do I have to go?” Jóhannes blurts out, shocking himself. He doesn't know why those words are his reaction to all of this. For so long he wanted so badly to leave Denmark—and deep down there was part of him that still did want to fly far, far away—but why then, why did this news hurt? Did he really want to leave Denmark still? Had he eventually come to love this place, to feel at home by Henrik's side? Why did part of him want to stay? Why did part of him want to go? How could he be homesick while he also felt that he was home? Why, in every direction, was he returning and leaving simultaneously?

There are no answers to these questions.

“Don’t I have a choice?”

Henrik brings his hands to graze the sides of Jóhannes’ cheeks, brushing away his silvery hair as gently and lovingly as he’s ever done before. He smiles, for the first time since Jóhannes awoke, but his face is still so sad. It’s frightening that Henrik doesn’t have the strength to hide how truly mournful he is. The hands on his cheeks are warm, comforting, but only for a moment.

“Jóhannes, we’ve never had a choice, about any of it.”

There’s knocking at the door again as Henrik tries to shove more of Jóhannes’ belongings into an already full container, cursing aloud and turning around to face Jóhannes in a hurry.

“Is there anything want to bring?” he asks. “Anything else you need?”

“The chess set,” and that’s all his little lungs can say, the rest of his air is trapped in his chest. It happens so fast. Kings and rooks and pawns all clatter down, falling freely to the same rhythm as the hammering of an impatient fist they both keep pretending they can’t hear. Henrik knocks over a chair, wheeling himself to get something out of the kitchen, but then he knows he can’t put it off any longer and he opens the door, breathless. The sight of Henrik in the doorway and the men standing there, wanting to come inside, becomes a slow blur and time blurs along with it. Jóhannes’ memories of this event will always be hazy, obscured, silent, just flickers of lights and shadows, the feeling of being carried, the sun rising and catching light on Henrik’s hair, above him, blinding, brilliant, burning.

He becomes aware again, listening to the thundering sound of the waves lapping on the sides of the pier, the sounds of the boat, hurried conversation around him, the rushing of bodies fluttering past, and the sensation of Henrik holding both his hands, crouching down and doing his best to keep his voice steady and strong as the tears run down his cheeks.

“Jóhannes, I’m so sorry,” he weeps.

It still feels like it is but a dream. His hands feel numb when Henrik squeezes them.

“I want to thank you so much for everything. I know it’s been hard, being here, but despite everything I’m so glad for our time together. I hope this wasn’t all bad, I hope you leave here with good memories and the knowledge that I’ll always be here for you, no matter what.”

But that’s not true, he thinks, because you’re letting me go. I don’t want to go, why are you letting me go?

Henrik kisses him, Jóhannes can feel the leftovers of tears on Henrik’s face as he’s pulled into the tightest hug he’s ever received.

“I love you, I’m proud of you, and someday soon we’ll see each other again, I promise. Even if I have to swim the entire way by myself, I will find a way.”

But isn’t that what my brother said? Didn’t my brother once tell me that he’d rip the world in two for me? That he’d bend over the pages of the map so that the gap between us was only a step

away? And where is Halvard? What's become of those promises?

He has to be forcefully removed from Henrik. The boat will run late if they don't keep to schedule. Tick tock.

Jóhannes, with his hastily packed luggage, has no idea if he should be watching Henrik on the Danish shore fade away into the morning mists behind him or face the open sea and the far off land of Iceland in front of him.

The World is Nothing More Than A Wide Open Prison, Act 2

[Iceland, 1890]

The island is as he remembers it, mostly.

His fate is directed before he even steps off of the ship. There's a house for him, a place that belongs to him alone, and the neighbors will help him out with anything his small body is physically incapable of doing himself. He'll be called upon for his duties but he'll be given the freedom to do what he wants otherwise. But after such a long, sudden journey, he's given the next few days to adjust. He's half as tall as the people who he's shaking hands with—people who look down at him when they greet him formally, with respect.

Ísland, Ísland, what a pleasure it is to finally meet the flesh and blood of my homeland—such a small child you are—but it is the smallest who have the most room to grow. But where are my manners? Here are your things, here is your home, we will leave you be.

The door shuts, the air is still, smelling of dust. Jóhannes leans against the back of the door and slides down against the sturdy frame. They've stacked his things carefully, right in front, and the task is on him to decide what he wants to put where, but he's not up to it right now. He sits, sighs, and stares.

It's weird to sit across from all your belongings, packed up into one place. To be fair, there's items still in the drawers of Denmark, but Henrik did a good job at picking out his favorite things given the hurried departure. He had spent a good deal of time sifting through the luggage on the journey across the ocean. It was weird then, to examine the contents of his life, and it still makes him feel strange now. All he can do is blink at the collection of baggage that defines himself in the context of his new dwelling.

But then excitement kicks in.

This is his space. He is in charge here. He is no longer confined to his borrowed room, he is no longer subject to anyone's way of living, he can do what he pleases and nobody can tell him otherwise. As most children do when given overwhelming freedom, he takes advantage of it. His mood swings from conflicted shock to that of complete giddiness. He runs around the house, yelling incoherently, with no diplomats or weary-father figures to tell him to keep his voice down. He jumps on his bed, bouncing higher and higher until his head bops against the ceiling, he flops on top of it and laughs, in complete disbelief of everything. He laughs deeper and deeper until his chest is heaving with each sharp syllable, and then he starts crying, clinging to the unfamiliar softness around him for dear life as water gushes from his eyes. He starts laughing again, then is struck with such distress that the only comfort he can bring to himself is to sit amongst his things, piled up around the door. He cools down. It's exhausting, as his emotional rollercoaster ends, he's absolutely drained.

He's hungry.

He buys as many sweets as he can, goes home to an empty house, eats until his sides burst, and falls asleep on the floor.

You do what you can, as best as you can, when you can.

Or something along those lines. Halvard made it sound a bit more poetic when he told Jóhannes these things about life. He can't remember the exact way Halvard spoke when he gave his advice, but he remembers Berwald's heavy voice, a voice that dropped and rolled like upcoming thunder as the years went by, so he repeats it aloud with that same thickness, but it sounds so silly in his high voice. He laughs, a laugh that he's picked up from Henrik. He mimics the words in Tino's heavy accent instead. He misses them, too.

He repeats it, in varying voices of his family, of the people he's met that have impacted him, as he starts the long task of homemaking, of placing objects where they belong and making the vast space feel more inviting.

It's a process.

[1889]

In his spare time he walks along the shoreline, climbing green hills, wandering as far as he can. Sometimes he travels all the way to remote villages, hitching rides with others on their journeys, and he learns from the people who make their living by the sea. He helps with the catching of fish, of babysitting children that are physically older than him while their parents work, and sings aloud where nobody can hear him.

A near decade and he's barely grown, the same clothes from before fit him, but they no longer carry the musty smell of Henrik's home. It's been lost, rubbed away, the sea air has washed it out.

He finds comfort, here. Among the black jagged rocks and the churning of lava underneath the soil, Iceland provides for his spirit in ways nothing else can. But the letters that he's sent from abroad tell him about the tribulations of Europe, of how it's yet another year in which Henrik cannot break free to visit him, a year where Halvard is too sick to leave his home, that Tino won't reply to anyone these days, and Berwald has his hands full of problems, etc, etc. And he feels a disconnect not only through distance but from the nature of his life. It's like picking up the phone and only hearing static, a mess of sounds and rhythms that cannot be deciphered, and it bothers him. He decides instead of listening to the white noise it's better to hang up and ignore the chaos of the mainland. Out here, it's mostly peaceful, and he can breathe.

But when he eats his meals, alone, he creates extra chairs, using old wooden crates and stacks of books to make his table seem larger, occupied, setting the carved wooden toys of Berwald as decorations across the tabletop, dines with cutlery taken from Henrik's drawers, and is careful not to stain the handwoven blanket he uses as a tablecloth that Tino gave to him before their last goodbye. Sometimes he leaves a spot for people he has faint imprints of, like Tino's cousin he can't remember the name of, who told him fantastical things he learned in books when they lived together—or a bony man with a crooked, wicked smile he met once who shared the same white hair as himself—or of the stern, silent woman he never got the name of who watched over him with great determination when he had gotten lost at a gathering of nations. Sometimes he pretends the room is full, that he's hosting one of the great parties of Vienna, of Paris, of Moscow, dancing the night away. And others, it's just a solemn meal with one empty chair, directly across from him.

But no matter how short or long the guest list, after every meal he puts away his decorations, his chairs, and pulls out the chess set.

An empty bucket serves as his opponent, as Halvard, as he reaches across the table to play both sides of the fight, clashing black against white and white against black until a king stands, defeated. He resets the board, sometimes talking aloud and making conversation with himself, inventing the replies in his head.

This house is big and freeing, but it too, is a container.

The island is so vast, there's so much he has left to discover, but large parts of it are already so familiar in the short time he's spent here. And here too, ravaged by the waves of the ocean, Iceland is a box in which he cannot escape from easily. He thinks about stowing himself aboard ships sometimes, to open himself up to everything and returning.

Returning? It's still a strange concept. If the Icelandic came from the Norse, does he belong in Norway, in Denmark? Is that why gravity seems to be pulling him down south, still? Or is he native here and a vagrant to other shores? Maybe it's a mistake. Maybe he's not Iceland at all, maybe he's representing something else, maybe they've been wrong about who he has been this whole time. It's times like this he wishes he could ask his brother, his father: do you ever feel pains of longing for what is not yours? Do you miss the people, the languages, the smells and tastes, of nations that you don't belong to? And to Berwald: was there part of you that loved the land of Denmark even as you ran away? Did you not only miss Henrik's smile, but did you miss the small peninsula that juts out into the sea? Do you feel a sense of homecoming, too, when you and Henrik meet in smoky restaurants in Copenhagen and apologize between arguments? Can you be filled with such disgust, your heart spitting vitriol and poison, and still love? Where is my home? Where do I belong?

Why must everything be so complicated?

[1900]

On one of his walks, he finds an abandoned puffin chick, the parents are either dead or have abandoned their only son. The chick is thin, starving, lethargic and life flows out of it with every breath. He picks up the small bird and carries it home, bartering with fishermen to give him tiny fish for this bird to eat in an attempt to save it from neglect. He pries the beak open with little effort and after some struggle, gets it to swallow. Every night, he goes to bed and hopes that when he wakes up the next morning the bird will still be alive. And every day, the puffling is perkier, flapping wings and vocalizing, becoming more aggressive and less tolerant of being held as the ashy face slowly blooms with bright, painted colors. Jóhannes tries to feed it and it bites him, hard, drawing blood, flying out to sea as fast as it can. It comes back to steal fish when Jóhannes flings them into the air but the bird refuses to come close.

One day, Jóhannes watches in horror as a skua swoops down and rams into the smaller bird, pinning it to the ground and snapping the neck in one carefully executed move.

Three days later, there's a faint knocking at the door, and he finds another puffin on his doorstep, identical to the one he lost. They cock their heads at each other, tilting in confusion and analysis.

A month later a puffin hunter walks by his house and Jóhannes recognizes his bird in his possession. He's less surprised to find the bird, alive, sitting on his roof the next day. A storm offs part of a flock, but the bird comes back to make noises at him as he leaves the house to go to work, demanding fish.

He had heard of this before, of nations passing their immortality onto other beings, and he wonders if it was the drinking of his blood that made it so. He experiments, cutting his arm and convincing animals to drink from him, but the sheep and horses that lick his wounds don't spring back from the underworld like the cocky bird who flies circles around his house. They're stuck with each other, Jóhannes pouting as the bird clacks the heavy bill against his side, tugging on his clothing for a midday snack.

The people here have gotten used to him quickly, word gets around fast of the small boy who doesn't age and walks into town to talk to officials about various things. Some greet him as Ísland, others as the different given names he's introduced himself as during his stay. Some never make eye contact with him, some knock on his door and insist that he's magicfolk, that he should come down to their farms and heal their sick animals. And then he's killed, by his own countrymen, who don't understand him, who fear him, who want to steal his power for their own, who want to know what happens when the boy across the street who doesn't age dies.

The answer is that he comes back, irritated and frowning, trampling your carefully crafted garden and tells his equally immortal puffin to shit all over your doorstep for the next several days. And even when you off the devilish bird, it comes back too, equally miffed, and without regard for its own safety flies close and nips at your ears.

But most profoundly, as the years have gone by, he's tolerated and ignored. Same as his bird, who tries to mingle with his own and never quite forms the bonds his is looking for. Slowly, the bird nests back in the box that it was raised in, sometimes even curling up with Jóhannes at night for warmth and companionship. The friendship between species grows.

Neither of them belong anywhere.

But it helps to have someone who understands, doesn't it?

[The Wide Open Prison]

His heart longs for the memory of him, to touch him again, to hear those words, to touch borders and no longer feel so far, far away from everything.

And he waits for him to return home.

[Sweden]

And he waits for him to return home.

[Denmark]

And he waits for him to return home.

[Finland]

And he waits for him to return home.

[Norway]

And he waits for him to return home.

[Estonia]

And he waits for him to return home.

[Iceland]

I don't care where home is, what home is, who home is.

I just want to see you again.

The World is Nothing More Than A Wide Open Prison, Act 3

He wraps his own birthday presents.

The World is Nothing More Than A Wide Open Prison, Act 4

[1910]

“I wish I had pictures,” Jóhannes laments, lying on his stomach across his bed and sighing deeply at Mr. Puffin. “I don’t really remember what anyone looks like anymore. Is it weird that I forget? It hasn’t been that long, has it?”

He grows an inch this year—a large growth spurt for a nation—and with it, the first faint dot appears on his face. Then another, like scattered stars, burning through his skin, bursting into view. They eat away at the paleness of his face and he feels as if they are incinerating the remains of his memory too. He often looked in the mirror and thought about all those remarks nations made about him looking so much like his brother, but now he can no longer see him there. Halvard is gone—erased off of him—and as he gains more freckles he feels as if he’s letting him go. He feels like he’s letting go of Henrik, too.

And for good reason: they still haven’t come for him. He’s grown used to life without them. He stops piling the past around him at his table and slowly learns that eating in solitude on a single chair isn’t that lonely. There an important peace within isolation. He forgets to dust items from his past that he doesn’t use anymore, sitting on the shelves and collecting cobwebs. The tools that once gave him comfort are ones he doesn’t need.

And really, he thinks, he doesn’t need anyone. His bird is all the companionship he needs.

And it begins to flip, he no longer wants anyone to return to him, he no longer wishes for Halvard or Henrik or anybody to enter back into his life. He has all the reasons to be angry, collecting them like hot coals that boil his blood from the inside. He throws the chess pieces across the room, chipping them. He tries to scrub the freckles off of his face so that he’ll no longer remember Henrik every time he looks at himself but all he manages to do is rub his skin raw. He cuts his hair in odd ways to hide the shape of his face and becomes oddly distant whenever other nations pop up in discussion as politicians discuss the future.

He’s fallen in a routine where he doesn’t care about them anymore because they feel like distant fragments of characters in an old saga. Sometimes he catches himself wondering how everyone is doing, but the wound has healed over, scabbed. It’ll get picked at, a brief jolt of pain, when he remembers a fond memory, when a flavor throws him back, when he hears words echoing in his head, but he sighs and shakes it off. There are times where you have to let go of people you love dearly and bury them as if they are dead to you.

But it’s unsettling when they arise from the dead, when you’re informed that both of them are coming, that they haven’t forgotten about you even though you’ve tried so hard to forget about them. I’ve tried to forget all of it. I’ve been trying so hard to heal, it’s taken me so long to feel okay with all of this, and now here you come to tear me apart piece by piece to ruin all of this that I have solved myself, deconstructing me like a completed puzzle.

So Jóhannes does the only thing he can do.

He runs, far away, falling and scraping his knees on rocks as he tries to get away and hide in the center of his country, in places untouched where nobody will ever be able to find him, where he’ll die of exposure in the beautiful wastelands of his country on the same day Henrik and Halvard

have to leave Iceland.

When he returns to his home, he finds sealed letters and presents, both from the two of them and from others abroad. There's two empty chairs pulled up to the table and a half-finished chess game between them. When he climbs into bed, he can smell familiar scents on the pillow that aren't his own, scents that he had long forgotten, now triggered and alive.

He doesn't sleep well again until the scents are gone.

[1935]

He starts to receive personal phone calls—his boss waves him over and tells him that nations from the mainland wish to speak with him—and he shakes his head and declines. If it's business, there's nothing they can't tell the humans on the other line.

“Why won't you let me talk to you?” Halvard writes to him, out of desperation. This time it's not a long worded letter or a series of affections, of apologies, that Jóhannes skims while listening to his heartbeat spike, dumping pages of correspondence he can't bring himself to reply to in bubbling cauldrons of hot, melted earth. No greeting, no farewell, just a question.

“I just can't,” he writes back, “and I really don't want to speak to anyone.”

“Could you write more often? I hardly hear anything from you these days.”

“I can't.”

“Is something wrong? Are you okay?”

“It's fine.”

It's just, how does one speak? Talking is such a simple thing, to vibrate the cords in your throat like a bow and string, it's so easy to greet his coworkers and to sing to himself in the mornings while getting dressed. But when it comes to his family overseas, it's like a blockade of ships around the island, pressuring him in against himself, the words choked in his throat and unwilling to come to life even if he picked up the other end of the phone. He could listen to Halvard's dull, broken sounding voice and pick up of how shattered a person he is just by the tone of his airy hello. He could listen to Henrik ramble jovially and do all the talking for him, but it would be so emotionally straining to listen to, and what if Henrik did ask him questions, what if he was direct? What if both of them asked him: Jóí, why are you isolating yourself, why do you not want us in your life, do you hate us? Do you despise us? Have I really been such an awful father to you, have I been a deadbeat of a brother? Are we no longer family, are we even friends?

But really, what he fears the most, what makes him shiver every time he hears the secretary announce that it's a nation on the other line, what makes him refuse to get a telephone in his home, which makes him cut the wires and smash the technology to pieces when it is installed without his permission, is to hear something else.

You've been so awful, so cruel.

And he knows he has, he knows that he has not been a kind soul, and that while his name suggests that he is blessed by God's touch he's not anywhere close to being holy. There's just so much he

wants to say, that he wants to tell them, but when he puts pen to parchment and tries to talk to himself in the mirror for practice the ink globs onto the paper and his windpipe closes shut.

I know that I've been immature and unfair, that I've treated you harshly, that I've been bad.

I want to fix it.

But I'm not ready to fix it.

I can't fix it.

Because I've been hurt by you, too.

[May 10, 1940]

This is the day that the United Kingdom invades Iceland.

Arthur Kirkland, a man that he's heard so much about, is shorter than expected. He perpetually grimaces, muttering under his breath about the bloody war while the excitement, anger, and fear of the Icelanders send butterflies and chills through Jóhannes' entire body. It's been so long since he's seen another nation, even if it's initially from afar as the British soldiers and the Icelandic forces have their awkward, but peaceful standoff. But something about him radiates an energy that differs from the humans, a spark that only nationkind have.

"Have we met before?" Arthur asks. There are so many of their race, so many rebirths and renamings, so many gatherings, some of those with sovereignty and others not, it's just so hard to remember them all.

"I don't know," Jóhannes answers, also equally unsure. "Maybe?"

They make it official, just for good measure, but it doesn't take long before Jóhannes realizes that he doesn't like him.

Arthur isn't exactly fond, either.

But he's a guest at his table all the same—the first nation who he invites into his home because he has no other choice—pulling up the second chair that Jóhannes owns that has been gathering dust in the corner for a while now.

The food isn't good, the conversation is sparse, Arthur's thoughts lie with war on the mainland and skirmishes abroad and Jóhannes couldn't care less about any of it.

And like that, Arthur is gone, sailing back from whence he came, leaving Iceland yet again a pawn of another to be passed around and exchanged over and over again.

He's granted a brief reprieve from further grief.

And then the next uninvited guest arrives.

[July 8, 1941]

Alfred arrives in much the same way as Arthur but instead of a grumpy, serious aura, the American is all smiles and laughing. He talks to himself and remarks about the buildings, the land, the sea, and while all eyes draw unwillingly towards his exuberant energy he's not talking to anyone in particular. All who listen are apart of his audience whether or not they want to be.

This rubs Jóhannes the wrong way too, as Alfred squeezes his hand too hard during their official handshake and leaves white marks and a lingering sense of soft pain. This isn't what he wants—or who he wants—but he reasons this is what he must deserve.

“I've always wanted to see this place!” he grins. “It's nice to finally meet you.”

“Yeah,” and his lips seal shut, both because he's not confident enough in his English to communicate with such a rapid talker and because he doesn't have anything else to add. He just wants to be left alone, but Alfred follows him, asking him question after question that he minimally answers before walking up his porch steps and slamming the door in Alfred's face. He screams into his pillow.

It's all the same.

[July 10]

He runs into Alfred in town, talking with his hands and trying to communicate to one of the Icelanders through a pidgin of mispronounced Icelandic and English. His neighbor, a young, shy girl who sometimes plays with his puffin, shoots Jóhannes a fearful look, wanting help. Jóhannes sighs.

“I'll translate,” he says, standing in between the two, fidgeting with his rudimentary, unpoetic English as he translates back and forth, a point in which the conversation converges. An hour later and the Icelander makes her way back home. Alfred thanks Jóhannes, complimenting him greatly, and the smaller nation can't help but smile at the enthusiasm and positivity.

Alfred invites himself over for dinner.

This time, Jóhannes doesn't mind as Alfred follows him home.

[July 12]

“You really have a beautiful country,” Alfred nods, spreading heaps of butter across bread, “you should be proud of it.”

“I am. Everyone is always fond of their homeland.”

“But you don't look very proud? Of yourself at least.”

“I'm not. I have no reason to be. I'm not the one who sculpted the fjords or mountains, the earth did. It's beautiful, I'm glad that I'm representing such a pretty place, but I'm just a pawn of the land and it's people. You know how it is.”

“Nonsense,” Alfred wolfs down two bites before continuing, adjusting his glasses. “I *don't* know how that is because I don't feel that way. You're also your own individual—the Jóhannes who made dinner and translated for me *isn't* Iceland. And you always have a reason to be proud of that individual self, just as much if not more as your collective self.”

“You don't know me.”

“It goes for everyone, not just you. There's shit you do, even if it's little stuff, that you should be proud of yourself for.”

“I'm not one for optimism.”

“It's not about optimism, man,” he smiles, ruffling his own hair with a lazy grin. “It's about treating yourself right in the face of a harsh reality.”

[July 16]

“Can you imagine Reykjavik in the future?”

“Not really. I'm so used to how it is now, it's hard to imagine it changing.”

“But hasn't it changed since you've been here?”

“Well, of course! Everything changes a little. But I can't imagine anything... big, happening to this place. It's small, but that's how it is.”

“Really? I can just imagine so many streets, with small little charming shops, and this town becoming bigger and bigger, far beyond your wildest dreams!”

Jóhannes frowns. “Just because it'll get bigger doesn't mean it'll get better. Civilization, nature, life—even Iceland itself—it can only grow so much before it collapses or starts eating away at other things.”

“Are you always such a pessimist?”

“A realist.”

“But are you still a realist when you dream? When you imagine the future, do you believe you should just settle and take the easy way out? Or do you imagine what it's like to take risks, to have large payoff, to dream and dream and dream to your heart's content and imagine what Iceland would be in your personal version of utopia?”

“I don't remember my dreams that often. And even if I did, would my utopistic Iceland be what I personally want or would I be influenced by the unseen preferences of my people? Do you ever wonder that yourself?”

“All the time, dude. But who cares? It's fun to imagine a better, more magical world for everyone.”

[July 25]

Alfred stays well past what he should've, spending time following Jóhannes who shows him the wonders of his nation, sometimes with a dismissive shrug and sometimes with a tiny, smiling pride. They talk a lot. It follows a pretty steady pattern:

“The world is your oyster!”

“An oyster is a shell, contained, a closed space: far from being open.”

“All the world's a stage!”

“It may be a stage but there are cues to follow and marks that must be met for the show to go on.”

“No man is an island!”

“That's literally all I am.”

“What a wonderful, open world!”

“What a dreary, depressing prison.”

But the optimism, Jóhannes admits, the cheery, syrupy nature of Alfred's overblown belief that everything would work out in his favor is infectious and hard to not feel the influences of. It reminds him of Henrik, a little, or at least whatever ghosts of Henrik remain in his memories. He finds himself less gloomy, less weighted, and even though Alfred is only his houseguest for a brief period of a few short months, it changes him. Alfred might be foolish, throwing whatever he can get his hands on into an erupting geyser, but his rowdy laughter will ring in Jóhannes' ears for years to come.

“I think the primary difference between the two of us,” Jóhannes says on the eve of their last day, “is that you aren't afraid of what will happen if you open yourself up to the world.”

“And you're so afraid of what lies beyond Iceland because you don't want to be hurt anymore, but dude, I think that's just plain stupidity. You can't live fully unless you allow yourself to be stung. And I think that's the issue—it isn't that I'm not afraid. It's that I choose to open myself up to everything and see what happens, regardless of whether it's good or bad.”

“It's insanity.”

“I've heard that I'm being a foolhardy young nation but I don't want to be anything else.”

They take a drink at the same time, sitting on the doorsteps under the white night. Mr. Puffin sleeps, curled up atop the folds of Alfred's discarded jacket, rumped and wrinkled carelessly on the side. Jóhannes drums his fingers on the edges of the cool glass in his hands and takes a deep breath.

“You know, I had a dream last night,” Jóhannes says, “that I was flying in the sky, far above the island in space, and from there I saw a halo, circling around the coastline, I think it was a road. I kind of wish it was real.”

“That would be cool!”

“Yeah. I'd love to take a road trip, you know, the ones that you told me about that you do in your

country.”

“When the war is over, you should come over to America, and we can drive up and down the Atlantic coast, across the vast Great Plains, cover both mountain ranges, skip rocks into the Pacific, get sunburnt, get frostbitten, and generally have a good time getting into all sorts of trouble.”

“That would be fun, but I feel that I’d like to do that here, first, to cover my own soil.”

“How about this—when you’re your own nation, when they build that holy road around Iceland, gimme a call and I’ll return here. We’ll do it together, and then, soon after, we’ll conquer mine.”

“You’d really do that? With me?”

“Duh, I wouldn’t be offering it to you if I didn’t want to do it myself anyway,” he laughs. “And yeah! It’d be great, and it’s always better to roadtrip with a friend anyway.”

“A friend?”

“What?”

“We’re friends?”

“Of course!”

“But it’s been what, only a few weeks?”

“We were friends from the moment we met.”

“... Sorry, it’s just strange. I don’t have friends of our kind, anymore.”

“You don’t keep in contact with your family?”

“No.”

“I can understand that.”

“You can?”

“I didn’t want to talk to Arthur that much after I broke free of him, myself. I mean, I had to, but it was kind of hard to face. He’s like, my dad, you know? And I tore him open, I beat him, I won, I hurt him, but I had to. It was hard, but I had to hurt him because if I hadn’t I would’ve kept hurting myself. Man, it sucked for a long time, because he kept looking at me like I betrayed him. And, hahaha, I honestly did! But it still hurt, on both sides, and it was hard to love each other for a while, and even when we did, it was strictly business before we started hanging outside of what we were forced to, talking about new music and hobbies and other stuff we mutually like. I getcha.” He laughs, which is muffled as he takes a long swig. “Sorry, it’s kind of heavy, isn’t it?”

“No,” Jóhannes shakes his head. “Not at all. Thank you for telling me that.”

And just like that, Alfred is gone too, leaving Jóhannes to pour over their past conversations for the next few years.

[June 17, 1944]

This is the date where all of Iceland holds a vote to see whether or not they should cut the cord with Denmark.

The government deems that Jóhannes himself should have a say to his fate and is allowed to vote like the rest of them.

He does.

Iceland is free.

It's Jóhannes' birthday.

He sends a request to install a phone line in his home.

He's another inch taller.

The World is Nothing More Than A Wide Open Prison, Act 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[Reykjavik, 1975]

He looks like the average sixteen year old, leaning against a building on a populated street corner and people-watching with a lazy gaze, lips pressed tightly together and straightening his spine every once and a while before relaxing into a hunched position, hands buried into his pants pockets. He sucks on his tongue, clicking it, and rummages through his jacket's pockets, finding a dirty wrapper—the writing fading but the seal of freshness still in tact—ripping it open to reveal three broken shards of candy that had once been one lump. All three are tossed into his mouth and sloshed around by his tongue before he cracks the smallest one with his teeth.

Alfred was right when he imagined Iceland growing rapidly, something that Jóhannes himself should've realized would happen from the moment foreign shoes touched his shores. Jóhannes himself has grown and continues to with no signs of stopping, lazing along a half centimeter every decade as the island stretches itself apart with each oncoming year, as Iceland develops, as the population booms.

He cracks his neck, and turns his head as a familiar voice calls from around the corner, a voice who has just arrived from the other side of the sea, a voice set on fulfilling a promise.

“Ready?” Alfred grins, tossing him a set of car keys.

“Of course,” Jóhannes smiles.

They head north, with the windows rolled down, Jóhannes in the driver's seat and Alfred beating his palms against his knees to the beat of one of the many cassette tapes the two made in preparation for this trip. Alfred doesn't know the tune but he tries to sing along with songs he doesn't know, in a language he doesn't know, laughing when he's terribly off and sticking his head out the open window to feel the wind blow back his hair. Jóhannes, still-faced and silent, keeps his eyes on the road straight ahead, with sunglasses—a gift from Alfred—covering his delicate eyes.

“You know,” Jóhannes says, as the first tape ends, “there's no reason why we have to stick on path.”

“Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?”

They look at each other, smiles growing, softening into a loving gaze of appreciation for each other before Alfred tells him to go for it with a whooping cheer, pointing ahead with the same severity he does when he leads soldiers into battle.

Jóhannes floors the gas pedal and grins until his teeth show.

As Route 1 curves eastward they head even farther north.

[Látrabjarg]

Four hours off course—atop steep cliffs overlooking the sea—they decide to eat lunch at the very tip of Iceland, stretching their legs and enjoying the hazy afternoon sun. They leave the keys in the ignition, the windows rolled down, still playing music and going their separate ways. Alfred wanders, between patchy grass and getting dangerously close to the edge to better see the massive colonies of seabirds coming to and from their nest sites. Meanwhile, Jóhannes sits, on a rock, beside the car, and after he pops the rest of a mushy sandwich in his mouth he takes out a tattered notebook and begins to write with a pen that is almost inkdry.

The fact is that Iceland was doomed from the start. As soon as molten earth built up the island on the cusp of two plates, as soon as the island was born, it was programmed to die. Iceland's miracle of existence will also cause its death: the island will collapse unto itself years from now, folding back into the abyss of the sea. Will the Icelanders have to migrate, finding refuge in some other country, scattering the globe before the eventual collapse of their homeland? By that point, is it possible that humanity will be flecked amongst the stars? So that the Icelanders can travel to an entire planet to replace their old nation with? Will the Icelanders as we know them still call themselves Icelanders, or is it more likely that they will adopt a new name? Will humanity even live to survive that long, to witness the day that Iceland finally is erased from the surface? If extinction is imminent, what will become of Jóhannes? Will he remain everlasting even after everything is gone? Or will he too, perish, as other nations have, as other continents have, as people do?

Nobody knows. None of us will ever know, because just as the landmass—the body—of Iceland dies, so shall we, eons before this even happens.

But we will live on, our bones will build the cradles for the future, our flesh will be like blankets to warm the living, our blood will sink into the soil and contribute to the pulsing heart of mother earth. Nobody will remember any of this but in the traces of the universe you will always exist.

This world is nothing more than a wide open prison. We will live here, we will die here, perhaps our children and our children's children will make it beyond the stratosphere, but we are doomed to end, we are trapped.

No, we are blessed.

There's a title of a book I've never read but always found relevant to this topic. "I know why the caged bird sings," says the cover text. So why do we sing, why do we create, why do we try to make our lives beautiful despite how absolutely unforgiving everything about existence is, why is life so excruciatingly painful, why do so many lives end so horribly, in cruelty, why are we trapped in such a vicious cycle, on a planet, that while living, is still so desolate and lonely? Why are we ultimately confined by our own selves, our bodies, our countries, our cultures, by this planet? Why then, when we are caged, do we sing anyway?

Is it to comfort ourselves, to comfort others?

We pierce and tattoo and cut the hair of our beings to make it our own, dressing it in garments that serve more as decoration than practical armor to become our own definition of beautiful. We paint the walls of our rooms scatter trinkets on the inside and build gardens and hang wind-chimes and wreaths on the outside. We celebrate with others, some close, some far away, on arbitrary dates across the country, across continents, across the entire world, throwing shaved confetti while thousands of lives begin and end in a single instant.

Through the horizontal bars that lie in parallel, we sing because we can sing, because although we are temporary, although the struggle for life is a daily battle, we must, because we can touch others with our song, because we believe we can make a difference, because we can do good, we can be good, even though we all know goodness doesn't exist and in the end our collective karma doesn't mean anything.

And isn't that the real beauty of it? That we try so hard in spite of everything.

Bearded vultures cover themselves in red earth to become beautiful, magpies collect things that shine and mourn their dead, hummingbirds migrate across the Gulf of Mexico in one harrowing journey that leaves anyone wondering why they would do such a thing. Unseen to us is a world of beings that try, endangered species who cling to existence by their clenched teeth, of plants baking in the desert sun, thirsty in drought but still waving their leaves in the breeze. And perhaps my interpretation of this is anthropomorphizing, that I am applying my own humanity to things that are not human, but isn't that in itself a testament of what humanity is? What it can be?

And maybe it's human-centric to believe that Mr. Puffin is an extension of Jóhannes' immortality. Perhaps, like his owner, Mr. Puffin is the figurehead of the species, of a subspecies, just like how Jóhannes is a fraction of the human race. And as the population of the Atlantic Puffin plummets, as the bird dips closer and closer to becoming extinct every year due to human activity, as a yellow light next to its name accompanies text that spells out VULNERABLE in warning, maybe someday soon, in the next two hundred years, Jóhannes will wake up one morning and his bird will be gone, erased off the planet as the last puffin dies.

We're all vulnerable, listed in caps. Everything is vulnerable, from our lives, to the ecosystems, to the continents, the globe, this solar system, one moment we're here and another we're gone, without catharsis, for who wants to argue that the dead find themselves to be poetic?

You have no choice in this matter.

You have a choice in this matter.

I wonder if caged wild birds daydream too, if by singing they are capable of turning the vertical bars into rows of trees, imagining the forest edge, that the horizontal binding is like distant hills, like lines drawn out across the horizon, if they too find a way to make their lives meaningful in spite of the lives they spend entrapped by something bigger than themselves.

And as Jóhannes puts the end of his pen in his mouth and chews, as Alfred stands with his back to the sea, looking wide-eyed at the interior beauty of Iceland, Jóhannes is looking out, listening to music drowned out by the shrieking of breeding birds, next to a white car now heavily splattered with dark soil from the road they've taken. Mr. Puffin leaves his perch, launching himself over the cliffside and out to sea, where he will dive deep into the water in search of fish.

And Jóhannes momentarily considers getting into the car, with doors flung wide open like wings, to hit the gas pedal so hard so that he soars out over the cliffside, flying, flying, in a vehicle painted the same dark and light color scheme as the birds that whirl around him, smiling and laughing until gravity works against him and the car dives nose first into the sea. He could swim to the surface or go down with the car or bash his head against the rocks and die but either way he'd come back living in one form or another. If he did this, Alfred would ask him why he'd do such a thing, but it would be something Jóhannes couldn't really explain, a feeling, a euphoria, a freedom for those few fleeting seconds before the car hits the water and he's flung back to reality.

One person's destruction is another person's poetry.

He doesn't sink the car—the hypothetical is more pleasant than the actual action—but he does rip out the words he wrote on the page and folds them into a paper airplane, holding it out in his hand before a gust of wind snatches it from him and gives it flight.

Iceland will live on this earth and it will die on this earth.

It is okay for all things to be temporary.

But there's still so much left unsaid.

And even at your most lucid,

There's still more growth and decay ahead.

Chapter End Notes

- Route 1 is a road that rings around Iceland, completed in 1974.

-Látrabjarg has some of the largest seabird colonies in the world, supporting major breeding grounds for a number of species such as Atlantic Puffins and Razorbills and is highly important for many birds' survival.

-When I was trying to find the exact science for what the future of Iceland holds I couldn't really find anything in my simple searching, but in my oceanography class my teacher/textbook said that as we know it, the fault that Iceland is on is going to eventually cause Iceland to collapse if what it's currently doing geologically is to be believed. This won't happen for a very long time but that's where the island is heading. Even if the factoid is wrong and we learn more about the fault and find out that it won't happen, regardless, Iceland will eventually become Not Iceland anyway if plates shift and continents collide, etc.

-The Atlantic Puffin is considered a vulnerable species (which is designated by a yellow color) which basically means "high chance of it becoming an endangered species in the future" and while puffins aren't as vulnerable as some other species (such as the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Sociable Lapwing who are in more urgent need of help), they're still only one step away from being classified as endangered. In North America alone, [37% of all migratory bird species \(which includes most birds\) are in need of urgent conservation help, including 57% of all oceanic birds and 56% of all tropical birds](#)) and that is *only* including birds that are in need of critical help. I'm of the opinion that because these species are not doing well directly because of humans it is important to try to save and conserve them because a lack of biodiversity and losing key species in the ecosystem causes problems that affect us as well. Even if you aren't a bird nerd like myself, losing a bird as iconic as the Atlantic Puffin would be really sad, and while it's true that all species eventually end in one form or another, because so much of birds' decline is due to people I'd rather try to counteract all the ill we've done in nature and do our best to minimize harm and work with nature instead of in opposition to it (because I think this will also benefit us as well).

-I want to touch on America and Iceland as individuals too, because I think despite their personality/attitude differences they have an awful lot in common and I think they'd get along pretty decently/I think exploring their relationship is interesting and I don't often see people talk about the two of them!

Black Rook, White Pawn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[1945]

The war is over, the world is more connected than ever, and he's been phoning the mainland for a while now. The conversations are awkward, sometimes he picks up the receiver and doesn't recognize the voice on the other end. He has to ask, to clarify, when the voice simply says hello, it's me. Most of his conversations are filling in blanks of what he's missed. Berwald talks about his garden, how he's been thinking of adopting children, about his hobbies, lighthearted things severely distant from the ails of the world. Tino apologizes for not writing as often as he should, but Jóhannes tells him he wouldn't have written back anyway.

"I understand, sometimes you have to let go of everyone for a while until you're ready to come back, if you even do," he says, to which Jóhannes hums in agreement.

Henrik does most of the talking when he calls, asking many questions met with short answers and refusing the line to have any silence, as if the lifeline between them was only strong enough to support itself as long as a constant stream of communication ran through it. But it's nice, just listening, and having Henrik carry the burden of conversation makes it a little bit easier.

Halvard reads to him.

When their first call resulted in only breathy silence, when after three basic questions neither of them knew what to say, when Henrik pulled the phone out of Halvard's gripping fingers to save them both from their anxiety towards each other, they both knew something had to change.

"Have you read the Aeneid?" Halvard asks him the next time, after they say their scripted, mechanical greetings.

"No, I don't think so."

"Would you like me to read it to you?"

"Sure."

"I sing of arms and a man," Halvard says, immediately, saying the first few lines from memory before opening the heavy book and resting it on his knees. Halvard reads for an hour, pausing, asking Jóhannes if he has any questions, if he requires any footnotes. Halvard promises to read him more the next time he calls.

And that is how it goes.

Hello.

How are you?

Now, where did we leave off?

“I’m going to be coming to the mainland,” he tells everyone. He’s careful with his words. It’s not “I’m coming home” or anything signifying that sort of sentiment. Just passive, precise, “I am passing through, if you want to see me.” Plans are made, Henrik and Halvard will meet him at the docks, and it will be the first time they’ll see Jóhannes now twice as tall as he once was. There’s been a scarce number of pictures, the last ones that were sent to him were ones from before the war, of Henrik holding hands with Berwald, one of Halvard, statue-like and harsh—a picture that he puts in the back of the dictionary he never uses because he finds it so hard to look at. He’s sent none to them in return.

The boat ride is pleasant, uneventful. Jóhannes sleeps a lot, dreams a lot, both while unconscious and awake. He thinks about the sparse bags he’s brought with him, the token few items he deemed important enough to bring back, borrowed books and things he was lent fifty years ago. He told his puffin to stay behind, but the bird didn’t listen, following behind the ship and landing on it with a huff, biting Jóhannes’ fingers when the boy tried to shoo him away. *Don’t leave me, how dare you leave me back there, never leave me alone like that again*, the puffin seemed to say, or perhaps that’s just what Jóhannes imagined, projecting. Either way, he feels guilty, and the bird stays.

The harbor is in sight. There’s only one person waiting for him, not two.

Henrik yells, loudly, before they’ve even docked, and through the sea of people he can see his hand waving. He follows that voice like a beacon, calling his name through the crowd. The flock gives way, suddenly splitting, and the nation of Denmark stands before him, grinning from ear to ear, and yet Jóhannes is struck with a pain like a gunshot wound in his chest.

Henrik looks so much older. The pictures were from before both world wars, not accurate of the changes that have warped his body since. He’s tired, thinner, and even though he’s smiling brightly with the heart of a younger man, Jóhannes thinks he sees strands of silver in Henrik’s messy hair. It hurts, but why it hurts is something he can’t place his finger on. He’s shocked, bleeding on the inside, as Henrik hugs him and spins him around, and from over his shoulder the border between the sky and sea mixes, indistinguishable. He’s set back on the ground, his fingers feel useless, and he watches Henrik cry in happiness, kissing his face and proudly chattering about how much his boy has grown.

Jóhannes can’t figure out what to say back.

“I thought Halvard was supposed to be here, too,” he tries, not what he wants to tell Henrik, but he is confused about his brother’s lack of presence.

“He’s coming,” Henrik nods, knowingly. “He just got delayed.”

“How do you know that?”

“I don’t, but I trust him, and Halle wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

And as if on cue, Halvard comes whirling down the docks, face red and panting, not slowing down until he stops, suddenly, five feet away from his brother.

He’s just as scary in person as Jóhannes expected, tall and looming, with messy locks a color that has gone unchanged since they parted last.

But the thing Jóhannes wasn’t expecting was for him to look so sad, so luster-lacking, not as stoic or as put together as he thought him to be.

Their reunion isn't healing, there's no bringing about a resolution. Halvard hugs him, strokes his hair, and as their cheeks touch Jóhannes can feel the tears fresh on Halvard's face but Jóhannes just feels empty, dry, and sick.

His hands push Halvard away, slowly, gently, he needs space, space that Halvard wants to fill, a void that's been hurting him for too long. It hurts, for both of them.

It's a gesture that only adds more splinters.

Henrik—bless his soul—if you can say anything about him at all, it's that he tries hard for other people. As selfish, stubborn, self-destructive through his own ambition as he sometimes is, he not only wants harmony but goes about trying to create it, repair it, even in the face of the impossible. It is this aspect of himself that I've always found admirable, an aspect that I wish to cultivate within myself, but I don't know if I'll ever be as good at it as I wish I was. I can daydream of the me that I could be, but I'm not that person, and I'll never be that glue that holds it all together.

And so, he fills the long walk home with fluff, actively asking Jóhannes if he can see the change in the sidewalks and on the people's faces. He swings himself from street poles and hums, a dark contrast to Halvard with hands shoved deep into his pockets with teeth clenched together and bloodshot eyes that bore longingly into the back of Jóhannes' snowy head.

But at the table in Henrik's home, the two brothers avoid eye contact all together. They both feel at fault for what happened at the docks. Henrik gives them both snacks and while he's excited, engaging with Jóhannes as much as possible, he knows that Halvard has been waiting for this much longer than he has. It makes Henrik's heart sink when Jóhannes looks away, unwanting to answer questions that Henrik asks, that the trust and camaraderie that used to be there—that was worked for—has gone. But it's not all about me, it's not all about what I want, Henrik has learned, I can't control everything, it takes time, time, time.

And this day is for them. It's not for me.

"Do you still have that chess set, Jói?"

"Yes," a nervous nod. "I brought it back."

"You did?" is said by both Henrik and Halvard at the same time.

And quietly, it is fished out between his luggage, stacked atop the table, pieces in neat rows.

"I'm surprised you still have it," Henrik smiles.

"Well, it isn't mine. I'm giving it back."

"You can keep it," Halvard offers, with slight desperation, as if the act of giving would somehow make this all better.

"I don't want it."

"You can have it, really."

“But I don’t want it.”

“But—”

“Why don’t you play a game with each other instead?” Henrik interrupts, smiling and smacking the two of them on the back, ushering them into opposing seats. “It’s been a long time since Halle has seen this set, and Jói, you always said you wanted to play against him.”

“I never said any of that,” Jóhannes mumbles, but he sits, on the white side.

The first pieces move, and Henrik excuses himself from the room.

“You’re taller,” Halvard says, midway through the game. “I wasn’t expecting you to be this tall.”

“I’m still short.”

“Taller than I was at your age,” he sighs, taking a pawn. “And I think your hair has gotten even whiter.”

“I haven’t noticed a change. ”

“And you have freckles now. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Even the sun gets spots, I don’t see why it’s so surprising. You have a new mole on your wrist.”

“Do I?”

“Or maybe not. I don’t remember.”

“That’s okay.”

“It’s not okay.”

Those last words shoot the conversation down and they continue for three turns with their heads hung low and eyes only scanning the board.

“It’s okay,” Halvard whispers as Jóhannes knocks down his rook.

“What?”

“Nevermind.”

“No, what?”

“Checkmate.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Again?”

“Okay.”

Riveting conversation, certainly, that Henrik hears as muffles through the shut door, ear pressed against the wooden frame. At least they're talking to each other, he thinks.

It's better than nothing.

Halvard wins the game, every single time.

At night, in his old room, he's outgrown his bed and his head and heart both pound with emotion and thought, keeping him up. This house is strange, it doesn't seem like the same building in which he used to live in, and there is some truth to that. The wood has been replaced, foundations relayed and renovated to meet the changing times. The plot of land, the design, the color is all the same in his memories, but what lays behind the walls and on them is different. It hardly feels like the same house anymore. It's impossible to sleep, and his body has sweat from the stress of something new, making his hair feel sticky and his throat dry. He leaves to get water.

And Halvard, sleepless, is on the couch on his way there, sitting, arms around his knees, staring into the fireplace with eyes that haven't slept in days. Henrik is in another chair—facing but separate—concerned, but the kind of relaxed concern a counselor has for their patient.

Jóhannes is interrupting, he'd rather wake up dehydrated than walk through the space between them, but he's already been spotted.

"Can't sleep either? Join the club," Henrik points to an empty, cushioned seat on the other end of the couch Halvard is sitting on.

"I'm only thirsty."

Henrik holds up a mug from off the end table. "I had a feeling you would be," he says. "Sit."

In his mind, Jóhannes envisions himself being defiant, saying no and going back upstairs, but he finds himself numbly sitting down and drinking out of the mug slowly, curling up in his seat and closing his eyes. The clock ticks, occasionally one of them pipes up and mentions something about the weather that day, or what the weather is supposed to be tomorrow, about Berwald and Tino and many others who are coming from abroad to say hello to Jóhannes, but mostly, overwhelmingly, the only conversation is the crackling of fire eating away at charred logs. Hours go by, and at exactly 2:14 in the morning, Jóhannes makes a request through half-closed eyes.

"Could you read to me? It might help me sleep."

Halvard, as lethargic as he is, jolts at the request. "Yes, of course! Anything?"

"Anything."

Halvard grabs the lone book on the table in front of him, running his fingers over the title. "Is poetry okay?"

"I *said* anything."

"I'll read to you one of my favorite poems, I think," he says, quietly, with a certain amount of content nostalgia.

“Ah,” Henrik smiles. “Invictus?”

“Of course.”

“It’s a good one, Jói.”

“Just read.”

Halvard thumbs through the pages to find the poem in question, but he doesn’t need it, reciting aloud by memory as he searches.

“Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.”

The night goes on, poem after poem, a log is added to the fire, and Jóhannes falls asleep.

In the morning, waking up with a blanket draped over him on the couch, there’s part of him that seizes, remembering what he asked Halvard to do, and there’s something about it that makes him anxious. He was tired, he was weak, and he asked for help, but he’s grown up now. He doesn’t need help, he’s had to live his life without help, his S.O.S. call of distress went unanswered so he became his own rescue.

Fear, fear, fear, it rings through his body like a gong.

There’s nothing to be afraid of, who has ever heard of a child who has feared comfort? But that’s exactly who he is. You get used to yourself, your pains, and when somebody else soothes them, somebody beyond yourself, your fingers curl and you recoil. It’s not your place to help me, you might hiss, and maybe you’re right. Maybe help isn’t what you need, isn’t what you want, and you’re content with the arduous tax that is providing for yourself and yourself alone. It is important to be self-sustaining, to wield power over yourself and mold yourself into a being unconquerable. There is this deep, terrifying fear that comes across to those who are given the choice to make themselves vulnerable, to ask, to hand their well-being carefully into the hands of someone who could very well hurt you. This is an exchange that Jóhannes is not ready for, it is something that

will take time, and it will be years before he feels comfortable sleeping in the same bed with members of his family, that he feels comfortable in their presence enough to tolerate them without this sense of dread.

And I know this because I've felt it, been there, done that. And I still sometimes glance around the room with this wary look, I still recoil and reel from others trying to soothe me. I am still growing, still healing from all the harm done. But I've come to find that it is so hard to allow yourself to become vulnerable when you've been the lone captain for so long. To open your mouth and say "please help me" and "I love you" is so hard to do when your head is screaming at you that you can't trust them, that they left you, that they didn't help you or come for you when you needed them most. I have been hurt, I will not be hurt by anyone anymore, I have been suffering, suffering for years, and nobody, nobody, is trusted.

But I wish I could tell something to the self that existed before me, the small child that I once was, that I could clasp my hands around my own small shoulders. I wish I could say to my small, shivering, lonely self, that it doesn't solve the problem by putting up more walls, more barriers, to shut people out. You have to be the one to smash apart everything if you want to get better.

I will still draw up my cathedrals to hide in, for I've always been an architect. I will retreat into the caves within myself and hibernate when I am fearful. I will stand with my quills out and teeth bared when somebody treads upon the forests in which I roam alone. I will still do this, and I think everyone does this occasionally, when they try to protect themselves.

But to have no fear, to open up the doors, to emerge out of your cave, to pad the forest with your bare feet and leave your weapons at home, this is important to do.

There are those like me who are chronically afraid, who have been passed on the torch of fear and anxiety from a neurotic parent who has had their own demons to fight against.

I must tell you that it is worth it to be vulnerable. To *allow* yourself to be vulnerable. Only then do you really start to connect with others, that you start living your life the way you want, that you really begin to fix things.

It's such an easy concept, but it's so hard in practice, even for me now.

Breakfast on a morning, after waking up from a night of vulnerability, is the most nerve-wracking thing I've ever lived through.

But it's what began everything.

This year is the year in which the first, collective vacation to Berwald's cabin recent memory began. Back then, the trees weren't as tall and it was before renovations had been done, adding more rooms to accommodate the growing number of people coming. The days are long in summer and Jóhannes gets sunburnt on the first day. He's glad for rain, when it comes later in the week, and despite worried protests from Henrik he walks out into the blustering thunderstorms and holds his arms outstretched to the sky.

"Henrik, let him be," Halvard says, holding a ball of yarn in his hands as Berwald unravels it, knitting fast and without error.

"You haven't talked that much still, have you?" Tino asks.

“Not really.”

“Give ‘m time.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I knew it'd take time.”

That night, Tino and Halvard are the only two awake. Halvard, as usual, cannot sleep, his hands jittery from days of sleepless exhaustion. Tino is there as support, he offered company during the dimly-lit hours, company that Halvard refused initially but couldn’t fight when Tino sat down across from him anyway.

“You really should see a doctor or something for your sleeplessness.”

“I have, they said there’s nothing I can do about it. I’ll probably crash tomorrow and sleep all day.”

Tino frowns. “It’s not healthy.”

Halvard sighs. “It’s just how it is.”

“I refuse to believe that there’s nothing that can be done. Speaking of, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Mm?”

“Remember when you were totally mute? When you first started verbally speaking again, just barely, just yes and no type responses? I remember asking you if it was easier writing out what you wanted to say instead of speaking it and we had a conversation about it. You wrote this three page response and gave it to me, but the idea behind it was that it’s always been easier for you to write rather than speak.”

“It still is.”

“Right, that’s why you still carry small notebooks and pens with you, in case there’s something you need to say you can’t say verbally. The thing is, I wonder if that’d help Jóhannes, too? Even if he doesn’t use it to communicate with us, do you think him writing stuff out would be good for him?”

“I think writing things out is good for anyone.”

“I bought a brand new notebook,” Tino says, reaching into his bag and digging it out, small with a bright blue cover. “It was supposed to be a gift for you, but if you want to re-gift it, if you think it’d work, you can give it to him.” He tosses it across the space between them and Halvard catches it, examining it closely for several minutes, thinking.

“... Thank you.”

“It’s what I do,” Tino winks, laughing softly.

Halvard does fall asleep on the couch, next to Tino who ended up laying with him for warmth and

support. He's out like a light until the early evening, not even waking when Henrik clumsily drops a plate in the next room. When Halvard does arise, he knows he can milk more sleep out of his groggy state, but he has to go to the bathroom and his stomach growls at him to eat. He does both of these quickly, knowing that the longer he's active the higher chance that he won't be able to fall back asleep, and he's lucky that Jóhannes is sitting on the porch, threading colorful beads across string, making bracelets by himself.

He sits, without invitation, next to him, and watches Jóhannes tie a stiff knot at one end of the thread before he speaks.

"I have something to give you," he says, gently placing the notebook on Jóhannes' knees, carefully balanced.

Jóhannes looks at him, but Halvard is looking out at the treeline.

"I think it's useful to write—or even draw—things you notice, things you feel, things you think. Do it, or don't, it's not my place to tell you one way or the other, but it might help."

"Help what?"

"Anything."

Halvard rises, mentions that he likes the bracelet that Jóhannes is working on, and leaves to go back to dreaming.

Jóhannes breaks the knot and lets the beads fall down the porch stairs, taking some spiteful satisfaction in watching it come undone.

But he does keep the notebook

Three months later, when he's at home and miserable, he begins to write.

Chapter End Notes

- The poem Halvard reads is *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley.

A Handful of Mended Chapters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I. Welding (Three)

“It’s a shame Eduard couldn’t make it this year.”

“It’s always hit and miss with him.”

“He always *tries* to come,” Tino sighs. “It’s just other things get in the way. Believe me, he’s disappointed when he can’t make it, it really meant a lot to him when we invited him to come to our summer vacation gatherings that first time.”

Henrik hums, low and deep, with eyes closed as he lays back on the warm grass and stretches his arms up towards the sky, making grabbing motions at the bright sun beaming down. Tino sighs again, checking his phone for messages almost compulsively, clicking his phone off every other minute even though he’d feel the vibration in his hands if he got a response.

“I know I care about him more than you, but—”

“Even if you’re closer to Eduard than any of us are, he’s part of the family too, in a way. Not in the same way, maybe, but you’re not the only country that shared history with him, spent a lot of quality time with him, y’know? I keep thinking, I don’t think you can easily divide the world—or us, for that matter—into bite sized-shapes, it’s not as simple as labeling everything Nordics this and Baltics that. And sure, on paper, Estonia isn’t quite one of us, but I consider Eduard family.”

Tino, who had been pulling up handfuls of grass, blinks in silence. “Henrik, you never told me you felt that way.”

“Really?” Henrik rolls over, onto his stomach, and props himself up like a teenage girl lying across her bed, whispering secrets to her friend during a sleepover. “Are you sure?”

“Not in those exact words, at least!”

“Well, I do. I dunno. When you’ve known people for so long family and friend kind of blur together, a little. Sometimes I have strict definitions of how I define my relationship with others, but even that is the subject of change. I mean, look at me and you.”

“Strangers to friends to losing complete contact to friends again,” Tino throws handfuls of grass onto Henrik’s back, absentmindedly, a motion that Henrik, too, doesn’t pay much attention to.

“I dunno about you but I consider you a *bestest* friend, not just a friend,” Henrik grins.

“Me too. On the same vein of thought I guess, do you ever think how painful it is, to know someone for your whole life and then realize that you don’t know them at all? I’m certain you’ve had moments like that.”

“Is this about Eduard?”

“I’d be lying if I said that there’s part of me that’s not afraid of that. But it’s not just with him, it’s with *everyone* I care about. That one day I’ll look at them, or listen to them speak, and it will dawn on me that they’re no longer the person that I once knew, that they are not what I thought they were or what I had assumed them to be, and that maybe I can’t love this person that they’ve become. The love for the previous interpretation of them still exists but the person they’ve turned to be is so horrendously difficult to find any love for, they’ve become a stranger that I cannot love, that I do not know, and yet I know and love at the same time.”

“So it’s like you and Berwald, but in reverse.”

“I guess, but it has a different nuance.”

Henrik rolls lazily onto his back again, staring at the clouds above him and letting out a massive sigh.

“Have you noticed that Halle has been smiling more in the past six years? It’s slight, but every year, gradually, there’s been a very slight shift. I think he’s happier now, overall, more at peace with himself. And sometimes when I catch him smiling fondly at nothing in particular just because something pleasant popped into his head, I wonder what’s going to happen as a result. How much will he change, will he have the same problems that he’s always had or will they fade away into nothingness? It’s hard for me to imagine Halle smiling at everything, without sleep problems, and not looking so pitiful as he often does. But when I think about it, when I first knew him, he smiled way more than he does now, he slept fine and easy, and he wasn’t weighed down by so much. Halle as I knew him when we first met is gone, the Halle that I initially loved doesn’t exist as he does now, the Halles I’ve fought with, the Halles I’ve had hard discussions with, the Halle that exists now, the Halle that will be, none of them are the same. And I can’t dissect what makes each one different, they’re all the same individual—different souls, one body, if you will—but I can say that there’s been times in the past when I’ve realized that I’ve been viewing Halle as an idealized version of a previous version of himself and that is not the man in front of me.”

“I understand.”

“I’m not going to say that I haven’t been heartbroken by what Halvard has told to me sometimes. I’m not going to pretend that the things that Berwald and I said to each other haven’t felt like being stabbed and disemboweled with every parting word we gave when I *loved* him so much. I didn’t like that we lost contact for years, Tino, it was frustrating, but it happened. But y’know, even though I hate thinking about it I don’t want to forget what I’ve felt. I don’t want to forget the changes in how I felt over the years, because it reminds me that if things ever get bad again between us, they can also become good again.”

“Henrik, sometimes I don’t even know if it’s really sustainable to assume that you’re gonna be best buds all your life, not when you have the lifespan that we do.”

“In all, truthful honesty? Given what’s happened to my relationships all my life? I don’t think it is, either.”

“Does that make you sad? Scared?”

“Yeah. But it also makes me believe.”

“In what?”

“I’m not sure? It’s not hope, but the act of belief itself, maybe. In the universe, I guess. And that I trust that everything is possible and the unthinkable can happen no matter what.”

“In the universe we trust...I like that. I think that’d make a really great tattoo!”

“Woah, I think so too!” Henrik sits up excitedly, rolling over and crawling on all fours to get closer to Tino. “What if we got matching ones that said that?”

“Are you serious?”

“Do I look serious?”

“I don’t know how to answer that with grass clippings all in your hair, but you certainly look serious!”

“Let’s do it, if you’re into it! It’d be a great reminder too, as it slowly fades away into nothing as we age, and then we can get new ones on, like, our 200th anniversary or something if we’re still friends then. But regardless, it’ll show that we loved and cared about each other for at least a little while in our lives, and isn’t that all that really matters?”

“What do you think about bringing Eduard into this idea?”

“I’m always up for a threesome!”

“Not quite sure that’s how I would phrase that in this situation, but okay!”

And after dinner, Henrik proposes they call Eduard, after the first round of drinks, both men cheering loudly when they hear a polite hello on the other side, cheering that brings a little life to the empty hotel that Eduard finds himself in, on the outskirts of some city he has meetings in the next day. They discuss their proposal, a contract that Eduard smiles at and accepts, making a mad dash to find some place to purchase alcohol for a celebratory toast held over the phone with friends thousands of miles away. But it doesn’t feel that way, no, it doesn’t, there’s a brief moment where Eduard can imagine them both sitting next to him, cross-legged on the bed and he wonders if on the other side of the world if Henrik and Tino imagine him sitting in one of the empty chairs at their table. They video chat, waving at each other for several minutes and laughing before saying anything. Henrik proposes a drinking game, Eduard is hesitant, worrying about work.

“When you’re us, the work is never over, so you gotta party while you can,” Henrik says, slamming down another drink, smiling. “You only live once until your next incarnation.”

“Is that your version of yolo?”

“Yeah, but yolouyi doesn’t roll off the tongue as well, unfortunately,” he slurs. “To our new future tattoos!”

“We already toasted for that!”

“Let’s do it again, then!”

And it is settled, secure, welded.

II. Those Who Are Lovely (Two)

When they split for the night, it isn't always in the same pairs. Jóhannes usually sleeps alone, sure, but he sometimes asks (or is asked) if he wants a sleeping companion. On this trip, he's only accepted two offers—one from Berwald to take a mid-afternoon nap, back to back and soundless, and a restful eight hours with Tino who clinged to him like koala all night long—but tonight, his puffin demanded through a series of long groans for companionship instead of roosting in his crate.

Through the walls, Berwald and Halvard can still hear the occasional loud laughter of Henrik and Tino as they continue to chat with Eduard, as they hold onto each other in drunken support down the hall and crash into bed together like the disasters they are, continuing to giggle and chatter as they kick their clothes off and fall asleep drooling against each other. Halvard mentions how silly and foolish they are, but Berwald, cradling him from behind, strokes Halvard's hair and reminds him they've had similar nights too.

"I guess," Halvard sighs, fumbling with Berwald's hand that wraps over him and rubbing it affectionately.

In the morning, they make breakfast for each other, early, while everyone else is asleep, Tino's white dog begging for table scraps and pawing Halvard's leg as he keeps his eyes focused on the pan in front of him. Jóhannes rises early this morning too, walking by without a word, snapping a leash to the dog's collar and leaving the cabin. Halvard watches him from the window as he disappears into the morning mist.

"I should've invited him to eat with us."

"He wouldn't stay, even if ya did."

Halvard sighs as Berwald pours him a cup of coffee, dark and swirling. They sit next to each other and share food off of each other's plates. Afterwards, when the sun has risen higher and the mist has gone, they go on a walk, too.

Halvard's jeans, torn and fraying at the knees and cuffs, are well-loved but falling apart, collecting grime when Halvard wipes his muddy hands onto his thighs. He hears something call overhead and spins, holding his hand against his forehead to shield his eyes from the brightness of the sky, and squints at the eagle soaring overhead before he loses it in the trees. When he turns to Berwald, Berwald laughs at the muddy line streaked across Halvard's brow and walks over to clean it off.

It's an action that is repeated over and over again, as Halvard digs through the soil and underbrush to find medicinal plants and good ingredients for tea, unconsciously touching his face. Berwald is there, nearby, with a handkerchief and water, keeping Halvard clean.

"I'm thinking about the time," Halvard says while Berwald gently lifts soil off of his closed eyelid, "when you and Henrik would wrestle in the mud and I was the one cleaning you two."

"That's cause ya never wanted to play with us."

"Why play a game when I know I'd lose? I've had enough failure to last me a lifetime, Berwald."

Halvard fingers through each one of his clipped plants, walks hand in hand with Berwald for

several minutes, and veers away into the understory again.

With bunches of herbs in each fist, he spins and spins along the ill-defined trail, making himself dizzy. Berwald joins in, although his hands are empty. They collide, Halvard laughs for the first time all day, awash in his own silliness, and Berwald begins to sing a old song as they regroup and journey deeper and deeper through bushes and brambles, off-trail. They step over logs, jump across stones to make it across rapidly flowing streams, stare at frogs and find nests of newly hatched birds. All the while, Berwald sings, sometimes low and rumbling, other times as high as his voicebox allows, screeching out butchered versions of songs but continuing anyway. Halvard, quiet, requests a tune from time to time, but they both listen to the forest when they stop to watch a spider repair her damaged web from last night's wind.

“Do you know where we are?” Halvard asks, stopping before they cross another deep creek.

“Nope.”

“Do you think we can make it if we jump?”

“I could, maybe.”

“I'm not so sure of myself, though.” Halvard scans the area, looking for any trees suitable for make a temporary bridge. “Did you bring an axe?”

“I'm not Henrik.”

Halvard paces up and down the bank, over and over, before sitting down next to a standing Berwald, taking his shoes and socks off, tying everything together, and throwing them onto a tree limb across the water. His shirt comes off, stuffing it with his plants and tying it together in a compact ball before tossing it over as well. He slides down the bank, holding onto tree roots for support, into the slow moving water, sinking himself up to his waist.

“It's safe,” he says, aloud to himself, and wades over. From behind and shirtless, Berwald can easily see all the scars that knot together down Halvard's back and shoulders, faded and disappearing, but still there. The varying age, the varying color, his untouched skin, the shadows of his working muscles as he uses his shoulders to pull himself up the other side of the bank, it's like camouflage, the way individual colors on a nighthawk blend themselves together into an unbroken, unseeable being. Halvard, on the other side, shirtless and sitting with his feet hanging over the edge, toes barely touching the water below, smiles widely at Berwald. Past pain, although still there, is easy to forget when you've found a place to be happy.

Berwald smiles back, turns away to back up, runs, and attempts to leap across the water. They realize at the same time that he isn't going to make it. Halvard leans forward and holds out his hand, outstretched, a hand that Berwald reaches, just barely able to grasp it, instinctively, and the brief moment of eye contact, the mutual trust and concern in each other's eyes before they realize that what they've done will pull them both down, is beautiful.

“Look who is unclean now,” Halvard taunts, shaking the water out from his hair and putting his shoes on over slightly damp socks. Berwald grumbles, wringing out muddy water from his soaked shirt over the river that they just fell into.

“We tried,” is all Berwald says, and it is the only thing that is said while they, in mostly soaked clothes, journey back home together.

Storms cling to the horizon behind them, far, far away.

III. Listen Up, Because the World is Always Trying to Tell You Something (One)

The interesting thing about trees that many people—especially in this modern day—don’t know is that trees are mostly dead matter. Only a small amount of the outside, the thin layer of skin of bark and the tissue right beneath it, is alive and growing. The tree rings that you see mark the growth and death of each individual year: a memory, a scar, but on flesh non-living. This dead skeleton on the inside is important—needed—for the tree to live, for fluid still passes through the tissue. It’s already coffin before we fashion it into one for our own bodies.

I have a memory from my childhood of counting the rings from a tree that my father chopped down. I can remember the hammering, splintering, of wood hitting metal and how it reminded me of a woodpecker. The tree fell through the forest and crashed to the ground with a great sound, and my attention turned to the bare stump and the rings circling around and around. I remember someone sitting down beside me and explaining to me that each ring marked a single year, and you could measure how well the environment was favorable to the tree by how far the rings were spaced apart. They pointed to a particularly dark line and mentioned that year, hundreds of years before, there had been a fire, a trauma, stunting the tree, but it continued to grow onwards. I don’t remember the face of this person when I replay this memory in my head—all I can remember is the dark hood they often obscured their face with in the wintertime—but I know who it was. I’ve never had any doubt.

I’ve come to think of people in much the same way as a tree. We carry emotional debt, limited by rings of growth around what hurts, and yet if we don’t grow we can’t survive. Some species of tree remain tiny in the understory, barely scraping out a life and waiting, waiting for a long time, until the canopy gives way so the tree can shoot up towards the sun, grasping as far as it can after a decade of low living. Some species of humans are the same way. There are others who shoot up rapidly and outshadow their competition, others who rot from the inside out until their entire body becomes corrupted, ones who sway in the strong winds and those who break under pressure. I find much of myself in a lot of these trees, but those who lay low until the timing is right tend to be the ones I see myself most in.

In the understory, amongst these slow-growers, Jóhannes finds an odd stump, carefully cut by man, with new trees sprouting from the center. The dog plays with pine cones nearby, tied Jóhannes’ hand, rolling them beneath her paws. Jóhannes runs his fingers across the saplings’ leaves and sits down next to them on the edge of the stump. His headphones, hanging around his neck, are put back over his ears, erasing the buzzing of the forest with the buzzing of flutes. He puts pen to paper.

If there is anything I’ve learned from reading the age lines of trees, it’s this:

You have to own your own suffering.

You have to say, this is what happened to me.

This is what I have done with it, you can see the incorporated signs of it into the layers of my being.

It was unfair, unkind, unbearable. You can see those thin, starving lines during the years in which it was too hard for me to move onward, in which the ground that I was rooted in didn't do me any good.

But I have grown anyway, year after year.

And one day there will be one summer that is blessed with sun and rain and all those good things that I need to thrive. The memory of that year will be recorded with a new ring, a new me, that is thick and wide and brimming with good.

And I will bloom.

On the edge of the stump he sits for a while, closed-eyed and unaware of the storm clouds gathering overhead and thunder rolling down the valley, mistaking the large booms as part of his music, percussion and nothing more. The dog yips in surprise as a raindrop hits her, jolting her awake, but with no change in resistance on the leash Johannes feels no difference.

Until suddenly, he's ripped forward, gasping for air and eyes flying open wide and frightened as his companion drags him onto his feet and into the woods, chasing something that rustles the leaves in front of them as it flees. Thorns rip at his face and snag on his clothes but even this does not stop their momentum. Like her owner, the dog is strong for her size, and even as Jóhannes yells at her to stop—a voice he can't hear over the sound of the beat—he's pulled out of the brambles and down the slope without mercy or pause.

The force of running downhill yanks the headphones from off his ears, leaving them dangling from his neck like a great collar, leaving him shell-shocked by the cacophony of noise of the outside world. The thunder, the forceful pattering of rain now leaking through the trees, the discordant singing of birds and the rustling of brush, loud barks, twigs breaking, dogtags rattling, the faint notes of music he can barely hear over the sound of his heavy breathing. It's no more overwhelming than the complexity of his own chosen tunes but this sudden displacement into another song leaves his senses spinning. The swirling green around him gives way as the ground drops. He tumbles and lands back on his feet, on flatter, stabler ground, clear of debris.

The trail leading back home.

Having lost the scent, the dog stops, but Jóhannes keeps on running, he pulling her until she paces up along side him. He smiles, first hesitantly, then wide, despite the painful scratches on his face and arms, because there's something exhilarating about the whole event, the kind of shock that makes you realize just how alive you are. It's probably just adrenaline, he'll surmise later, that caused the feeling, that drove him to keep running down the trail towards home as if a great beast followed him. He dislikes running but he'll sprint until he makes it onto the porch, breathless and wild-looking with dirt on his face and thorns still embedded in his knuckles.

But Jóhannes does stop, just for a second, his footsteps petering out for a moment as he turns his head towards the sky and watches the lightning strike overhead, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck jolt. A moment, then gone, but he can still feel lasting static running down his spine.

He will let Halvard extract the thorns from his body and make him bleed, he will look down at his toes that wriggle before his brother pulls out the bigger ones, blood fills the ridges and valleys of his palm prints before washing away down the drain. Johannes will look at himself in the mirror

and can see Halvard behind him, tired but dutiful as he pilfers through a first-aid kit for ointment and bandaids.

The great crack in the sky, lighting up before it heals and scabs away, makes him feel a sense of completion, a feeling he'll carry home with him and savor until Halvard shuts the door behind him when he leaves Jóhannes and his carefully dressed wounds alone, sitting on the edge of the bathtub, bewildered, bewildered.

Chapter End Notes

[Check out this cool art that sketchycheese made for SoS!](#) I will be adding it to the chapter it belongs to as well. Thank you again for drawing fanart, it makes me a happy soul.

Guð blessi Ísland

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[Iceland, October 5 2008]

Jóhannes has a feeling it'll be a cold month, despite how warm it's been this year.

It's Sunday. He sleeps in until midday after staying up all night, makes cereal, and stares outside his apartment window, watching people pass by on the street below while he eats. He misses his old house, the one he lived in when he came back for good here—he misses the space sometimes, but the memory of those empty rooms and the longing for a family that he didn't have was what made him leave the place behind, selling it to be renovated and rebirthed by a family who fit. Besides, he likes it in the city, where he can walk to work even after waking up late, and there are people here. People, people make him feel warm, maybe because he's been alone for so long, but even just glancing at his people causes a jittery feeling in his stomach. It's a craving, to be around others, and even the loneliest need friends.

Sometimes he plays music with the students in university, blending in with them and singing songs that are drowned out by the city. He goes down to the yarn shop to buy more supplies but more importantly he chats with the woman who owns the place. She says he reminds her of her son, a comment that he wants to reply with "right now, I'm uncomfortable of the idea of being anyone's son," but he knows such a comment may cause him to eventually explain his family, explain his race, that some mornings he'd rather be orphaned than have a home.

"My brother," he sometimes says, casually to those in passing, but it so often feels wrong, like they shouldn't be related, that he shouldn't be referring to him in such a familial way, it doesn't explain how complicated their relationship is to the near strangers he talks to. My brother is a trainwreck, he wants to say, but there's a little voice in his head that tells him that he's a trainwreck too, that they're all fucked, that being fucked up runs through this family's blood and there's no escaping it.

"I don't want to continue that legacy," he thinks to himself as he peruses through thrift stores for warm clothes that fit him. He buys two jackets, one with deep pockets in his favorite shade of brown and the other, green, with a hood. He really hopes he won't.

It's been an okay year, so far. At home he lies down and looks up at the old holiday lights he's taped around his room, above his bed, playing with the controls to make them flash like fireflies, multicolored, dazzling. His puffin rubs his beak against his shoulder, affectionately, and waddles over to his chest, curling up atop it. The walls are too barren. He needs to get posters, or picture frames, or something. Maybe he should paint? He sighs, flicking a switch, and the lights stop flashing rapidly but still shine. He closes his eyes, the rainbow lights bringing impressionist color to his skin. It's Sunday, and there is work to be done tomorrow. He wishes the weekend was longer.

His stomach feels a little upset as he goes to bed and he's not sure why.

[October 6]

He wakes up suddenly, violently ill, unstable, like his insides are rotting, being torn apart. He

knows something big has happened to his country, something that makes his whole body shiver and he can barely make it to the bathroom in time to empty the contents of his stomach into the toilet. He can hear his phone ringing beside his pillow, text messages being sent to him at rapid speed, and as the hours go by they don't cease. The world must know what's happened, as he can pick out the customized ringtones of people he knows from the other room, friends from abroad, in other time zones far removed from his own—and yet he's still in the dark. It will be hours before he feels safe enough to leave the bathroom and retrieve his phone, but mere moments later he'll have to rush back, sick again. It won't change anytime soon. The economic crisis is only just beginning.

Around Iceland, three words echo in the minds of the people, foretelling the faltering of the nation.

Guð blessi Ísland.

Guð blessi Ísland.

God bless Iceland.

And may the universe have mercy upon your soul.

[October 7]

The next day at noon he is half-asleep, curled up and crumpled on the bathroom floor. He occasionally sits up, dry heaving into the toilet, but there's nothing in his stomach to purge. He had to answer the door once, people from the government came by to see what effect the news has had on their state. They want him to come down to the Althingi. He says he doesn't feel well enough to go, his legs are so shaky that he has to sit back down while they talk to him. Maybe tomorrow.

Tomorrow, they demand. Your people need you.

When he hears knocking at the door again he blocks it out by putting his hands over his ears, trying to muffle the sound. It only makes his headache worse, but then it stops. He hears keys jingling on the other side, the lock being fiddled with. His own personal anger wells up inside of him, making him rise to his feet and drag himself to the door.

"I told you, I don't feel well, maybe tomorrow!" he shouts, trying to hold the door shut, but he's too weak, and it slides open with ease anyway. It's not who he expects to see.

It's Halvard.

The elder moves in, swiftly before there is any protest, lugging a suitcase behind him and practically flinging it across the hallway. His attention immediately turns to Jóhannes, gripping him by the shoulders and staring at him. He knows asking if his brother is okay is redundant, as Jóhannes pushes him away to return to hanging over the toilet.

"I'm going to help you through this," Halvard says, crouching down beside him and stroking Jóhannes' white hair.

"I don't need help."

"You do. Henrik and Berwald are taking over my duties while I'm here to help you. I'm going to

stay here.”

“I never asked you for help,” he grits his teeth.

Halvard knows arguing with him will be a losing battle. He just sits with him instead, rubbing his brother's back through half closed eyes and letting Jóhannes fall asleep on his shoulder when he's too exhausted to move.

“I'm proud of you, you know,” Halvard says, after tucking him into bed. “I've always been proud of you.”

“For what?”

“Everything.”

It's easier to use one word instead of thousands, sometimes.

Jóhannes allows Halvard to sleep next to him, but only because he's too weak, too tired to say no, and it's easier having his brother be by his side to attend to his pains.

It's easier, but it makes him feel like a failure, that he can't take care of himself.

[October 9]

People from the government come by again, this time, more desperate to see him.

“I will not let them take you,” Halvard says, as fists pound on the door. They grow louder, telling Jóhannes that they need him now, they need his opinions and feelings and thoughts in order to quell the anger that is growing in Iceland, but Halvard shouts at them through the door, rage unfurling from him like blooming petals. He only agitates them greater, and Halvard holds the door shut, throwing his body weight against it to keep it closed, shouting about how foolish man is, how nations cannot be at fault for the mistakes of their people, how no matter how much you try to find an answer there's none there for you.

There's a distant memory of Henrik long ago, opening the door without a fight and letting them take him away. It replays over and over in Jóhannes' mind. It feels eerily familiar to the image of Halvard, here, with his knuckles clenched white and using all of his strength to keep the door shut.

The squabbling between the Icelanders and his brother grows. Halvard sends a butcher's knife clean through the door. They scatter, momentarily, but then the knocking and pleas are back.

“I won't repeat the same mistakes,” Halvard shouts at them, punching more holes with the blade. “I refuse!”

So that his door isn't torn to bits, Jóhannes makes a deal. They can call him, talk to him remotely, on the condition they leave him be in person.

“It's more for your safety than it is mine, he says to a young woman, through the stiff, random gashes that Halvard decorated the door with. “I'm pretty sure he'd kill you if you made your way inside.”

“Or, you know, we could kill him instead, wouldn't that make things easier? Or you could kill him, and come meet with us. He'd come back anyway, right? So why would it matter?”

It's a comment that doesn't sit right in his stomach, and he's sure it's not just nausea.

Halvard fixes the door, paying for the damages, but keeps knives within reach, just in case.

[late October]

“It'll get worse before it gets better,” Halvard says, thumbing through a book he borrowed from the library. “All you can do is give it time until it passes.”

Jóhannes says nothing, laying on his back and looking at the lights that he has no strength to turn on.

Halvard makes his meals, does his laundry, his errands, pays his bills, lets his puffin slip in and out through a window. He helps him get in and out of bed, helps him clean himself, helps him dress himself, and not once does he complain, makes comments, misses something that Jóhannes needs. Halvard rarely leaves the small apartment, rarely leaves his bedroom. Halvard reads aloud to him, shows him silly pictures that his family is sending from far away, draws flowers in grayscale from memory and pins them to the once empty walls so at least Jóhannes has something to look at. He opens the windows so sounds and air of the outside can waft their way in, sings to him quietly in the evening with uneven, rough notes, turns on the television when Jóhannes requests, and tells him repetitively that he will do anything he can to be of service.

Mr. Puffin bites Halvard's hand whenever Halvard tries to shoo him away so that he can move Jóhannes. Sometimes the bites break his skin, splattering him with blood.

Jóhannes spends most of his time sleeping, or trying to sleep—he'd sleep for a century if it meant all of this was over, but his stomach wakes him or his phone goes off inconveniently with idiotic questions that Jóhannes can't answer.

“I can't do anything,” he says, over and over again.

When he sleeps, Halvard tries to sleep too, curled up beside him, sometimes so close that Jóhannes falls asleep to the familiar scent of his brother. Halvard says he's resting well but the rings under his eyes suggest otherwise. Two days without sleep, then three, four, maybe five, and when he's cutting carrots in the kitchen he nicks himself nearly twenty times, having to sit on the floor with his eyes closed for several minutes to not feel like his vision is swimming, that he's drowning and fading from reality.

“You need to rest,” Jóhannes says angrily, a comment that irritates his brother, still sitting on the floor with his hands bleeding. “You're the one who needs to rest,” Halvard replies, trying to be sharp and authoritative but his voice is weak.

Jóhannes asks to see the first aid kit he keeps under the bathroom sink and he bandages the still fresh cuts on Halvard's hands as they sit across from one another at the table. Halvard teeters a little when he stands and has to lean against the wall to catch himself.

Neither of them is really quite sure who is supporting who when they make their way back to nap.

They both sleep soundly for well over a day.

[early November]

Is it better? It's hard to say.

He hasn't seen the outside world in over a month and he sometimes feels like the walls are closing in on him, like he's being subjected to endless purgatory, that he will live out the rest of his life in limbo. Halvard has brought him tokens from the outside world to remind him that it still exists. Handfuls of black sand that Jóhannes lets fall through his fingers. A vial of seawater that he tastes to feel the salt on his tongue. Pastries from places he used to frequent and the sounds of it as Halvard sat carefully recording the ambiance with his phone. They eat together and listen to the recording and feel a little less lonely. Halvard hands him notes from the yarn shop owner and other friends, notes that Jóhannes appreciates but he's not sure how Halvard accomplished finding people that Jóhannes has never told him about. "I told them that you're in the hospital, in quarantine, so you can't have visitors," Halvard says when Jóhannes gives him a questioning look. "They don't know the truth about you so it's better to lie." It doesn't answer his question as to how, but he doesn't know if he wants to know the answer.

Even his puffin has begun to sense that something is terribly wrong with his owner, that he is not becoming a hermit by choice, and begins bringing nesting material to lay around Jóhannes head and offers freshly caught fish from his bill.

Halvard suggests they try to at least sit on the balcony outside for a while. He thinks the fresh air will do them both good. It is good, feeling the breeze after so much stagnant air, until nausea strikes him and he has to empty his stomach in an empty flowerpot. They both sigh. At least they've discovered the pattern: as people stew in their anger and their thoughts during the daytime Jóhannes becomes the sickest, the collective consciousness of the land puppeteering his reactions. At night, when most of the nation slumbers, he's able to keep food down and stand on his own. He's shaky still on his feet, mainly from the lack of use of his muscles, but it's a small victory, being able to walk without keeling over in pain.

The last of the bandages come off of Halvard's fingers.

"You know," he says, flexing his hands and admiring the nearly healed cuts while Jóhannes shoves food down his throat, hoping to digest it before the country awakens, "early on, I considered stealing bags of fluids and whatnot from the hospital, to keep you stable."

"You could've just taken me there, like a normal person, instead of potentially getting yourself arrested."

Halvard says that we can't have that, that humans would only bother him, that panicked politicians would beg him for hours for any kind of wisdom, guidance, endless questions met with very few answers. They'll never be satisfied, he's said over and over again during his stay here, that he's seen it in great kingdoms and small tribes, humans can't easily admit to their mistakes, their faults, and it's so much easier to scapegoat everything away. They'll pray to you for answers and persecute you when you're wrong, they'll treat you like an all-knowing god one minute and like a chained animal the next. The government, the populace, both will try to doom you. There's no winning, there's never been any winning with humans, and Halvard scrunches his face, bitter.

“So then, what does that make us?”

Jóhannes wants an answer but Halvard shakes his head, his bangs long and overgrown as he’s left his hair uncut. The ends of it are starting to curl, like the wisps of stray wheat bending in the wind. “I don’t know,” he says in confidence, with a little sadness. He passes a bottle of painkillers to Jóhannes, medicine to curb the aches and sensitivity in his body. It’ll help, he says, and he speaks from experience. It’ll bring your fever down, it’ll dull the pain in your chest, it won’t heal you, but it will help you. Sometimes Jóhannes takes it when his body is unbearable to be in, where he’s laid motionless and asked his brother to kill him, to end his suffering for a little while, to let him go into a state of hibernation without thought or feeling.

He’s seen Halvard consider it, the glint and the way his eyes shift to the knives placed neatly near the doorway, pointing outside. The curling of his fingers in the air imagining what it would be like to crush his brother’s windpipe, the casual perusing of his medicine cabinet for drugs that can kill—the thought has been there, in his brother, and that steadiness on his face makes Jóhannes uncomfortable even though it’s exactly that kind of forethought that he’s asking. It’s the same feeling of uncomfortability that he got when that woman implied that he should kill his brother, when he keeps replaying that conversation over and over in his head, when he thinks about how he could save his brother from his overwhelming desire to care for his only sibling, his only son.

He dreams of his motives this way, as heroic, he has this heroic need to do it all on his own, to become Atlas and hold all the problems of the world on his shoulders—perhaps that’s why his droop so. Halvard ruins the narrative Jóhannes has built for himself, derails the tale from the way in which he wants it to be written, but there is not a single good story that’ll ever occur if you allow things to go the way you want them too, to tell the story in the way *you* want to be told. He still tries to hold the reigns to himself but he’s never been in control. Nobody, ever, has had control.

It’s all too grim and none of it is healthy.

He’s not even feeling that bad when Halvard offers him the medication, but he takes it anyway. Sometimes, it feels better to feel nothing than anything at all. The pill gets caught halfway down his throat, sitting there like a lump, uncomfortable, until Halvard hands him a glass of water to wash it all away.

We were never meant to win, were we?

[late November]

“I love you,” Halvard says before dawn, before they sleep. “I love you,” he says again, even though he knows Jóhannes won’t say it back. He’s not asking for it back although his heart aches to hear it. It’s unconditional, it always has been.

Jóhannes says nothing and bats Halvard’s hand away as his brother tries to stroke his hair.

Halvard apologizes and is thankful enough just to share space with him.

Medicine doesn’t soothe his evening migraine, it thumps and pounds and injures him, he nurses it but ends up emptying his stomach again and wishes all of this was over. It’s unbearable, sitting in near tears while Halvard tries to comfort him with words that Jóhannes isn’t listening to. “Stop talking,” he says, and Halvard obeys. “Leave,” he says, but Halvard doesn’t, only moving back into

the dark hallway and out of the artificial light of the bathroom. They sit against opposite sides with the wall between them and the door wide open. The light flickers for a minute.

“You always have a choice,” Halvard says.

It’s too much.

“Do you think *I* had a choice in this?” Jóhannes shouts, standing to his feet and turning to corner Halvard in the dark. He pulls up his brother by the collar of his shirt and pushes him against the wall with all the force he can muster. “Do you *really* think *we* have a choice in this, Halvard?!”

His grip tightens as he seethes in anger, wheezing through his teeth. Halvard’s eyes are wide, surprised but still as empty as they’ve always been, unfeeling, something that Jóhannes has never been able to do.

“I’ve never *asked* for any of this, I’ve never *wanted* any of this!” he sobs, angrily, fire alighting in his eyes that burn into Halvard’s and melt them, melt his stony face away until there’s nothing but fear and fright as Jóhannes continues to shout word after word of how unfair this purgatory is, how choice is an illusion and nobody should know that better than his elder brother. It’s not fair, it’s never fair, it will never be fair, to pretend that we, the immortals, have any say in how this world runs? They’ll ruin us until we die, Halvard, they always have, and no amount of threats you make through the door will ever make them go away.

Halvard is speechless, robbed of the ability to use words by the white teeth that snarl at him. He can’t fight, he’s too shocked to react as Jóhannes opens the front door and pushes him out into the cold, throwing Halvard’s possessions at his feet as Jóhannes rejects him, rejects him with venomous words and the belief that all is hopelessness.

“I never wanted you here,” that’s what hurts Halvard the most. He stands, still, even as the door is slammed in his face and he can hear Jóhannes weeping on the other side.

He picks up his things off the doormat, slowly, and he does the only thing he can do.

Halvard leaves.

Chapter End Notes

- The Icelandic economic crisis was something that I found really interesting and I followed it pretty closely during the latter end of it in 2009-2010. Unfortunately my memory has gotten worse over the years and I don't really remember anything now (I had to do a lot of re-reading just to refresh myself for this fic but my grasp of it is still really limited), but I do think reading about the Kitchenware Revolution and what happened in the aftermath of the crisis and the public reaction is/was really interesting.

- Guð blessi Ísland or "God Bless Iceland" was a phrase used to end the announcement of Iceland's financial problems and was brought up a few times since then during the protesting and general discourse surrounding the crisis. There's a documentary about the crisis by the same name. I thought it's an interesting, simple but powerful phrase that comes off to me both as strong and as desperate? I don't know, I've always liked it.

Corruptioning

[January 2009]

Let me tell you something I've been meaning to say for a while now, something we have to establish so that we don't cause further heartache down the road:

This won't ever be your perfect story.

Because it's mine.

It's mine.

And maybe as it starts to end there is a part of you that believes this can't be all, there has to be more here, and if only I could tear the seams that bind these words apart and see hidden paragraphs, absent chapters, the letters that have been deleted and erased, there has to be something, something, anything. The unwritten parts that never made it to fruition, the words that were put together and tossed out in vain, the parts in which I used my sharp scissors and cut them out, leaving emptiness and only more questions. I have confessed so much of myself and yet I have revealed so little.

I want it to be this way.

Maybe one day I'll change my mind about it, but I don't think it will be anytime soon.

It's already taken me long enough.

Partitions, partitions, watching families on television as they draw up their walls, hide their secrets, bury their crimes, whisper into the dark their feelings but never make them known. Art imitates life so surely this is the way things are, a world of miscommunication and the fear you harbor in your heart: if only your loved ones knew how much of a monster you were, would they dare to stay? Jóhannes flips through the channels but they're all the same. Resolute moments are only good for a moment, and then they fail, they fail because there needs to be a season two and we can't tell a story of goodness for twelve more episodes. You can only postpone the inevitable.

Halvard hasn't spoke to Jóhannes since he threw him out. Jóhannes turns off his phone most of the time so nobody can reach him and goes to work with scarves covering his face. He's turned cold, even in the heated rooms, and he shivers. There's some days he stays at work overnight because he feels too sick to go home, that passing by waves of angry protesters will only make him vomit on the sidewalk. He worries, when he's alone at night, curled up on the floor or in bed at home. He still can't get the colored lights to work and he wonders if a wire has shorted out. He has to buy a new set. They work, he smiles, and he's actually happy for the first time all month.

He wonders if his family is okay sometimes, he thinks maybe he ought to answer them, but the fact that they don't arrive at his doorstep and cause a fuss leads him to believe that Halvard has carried the message across the ocean that he does not want anyone here on his island. Or maybe he's been forgotten, the mystery fifth man in the photos back home, the long lost son that nobody knows, the cousin who sawed himself off of that low hanging branch of the family tree, the boy who nobody

talks about, nobody will leave flowers at his unmarked grave. His imagination gets the better of him, or maybe it's the fever that wavers his perception. He thinks about calling, clicking contacts and holding his finger over the call button—but he looks at the television and realizes that it's not worth it to change anything.

None of it is worth it, really.

None of it is deserved.

He's been pressure cooking since Halvard left.

He gets up one morning and instead of going through his routine he decides to go outside into the few hours of daylight that he has. It's cold and he's grown thin from being ill, thinner than he wants to be, thinner than he should be, and he goes back inside to put another sweater on insulate him further and sticks three homemade cookies in his mouth that he received two days ago from an unknown sender with no return address. He licks the crumbs that have fallen on his scarf before putting it over his face and walks away from everything.

He wanders as far as he can, out of the city and into the outskirts where looming cranes and half-constructed buildings litter the landscape, a meadow of empty husks and incompleteness. He's not sure if he's sad about the building getting halted because he remembers what used to be here, he used to play here once, when it was nothing but green hills. He's not sure if he's sad, but he hasn't really felt anything lately other than a few vague emotional cinders that flicker out in the cold. He picks up a crowbar, an abandoned tool left behind in this desert. It's heavy in his hands, but he doesn't let it go, dragging it behind him and letting it scrape across the ground. It makes him feel less alone in this unfinished development.

A raven flies overhead, letting out a hoarse caw into the dead air.

Jóhannes bangs the crowbar on the iron bones of the building. It caws again, veering direction suddenly and flying out beyond his line of sight. He bangs it again, getting another caw, but he's alone again. His fists clench and his jaw trembles.

The next time he takes the crowbar in both hands and raises it over his head before slamming it down against the concrete. Again, again, again, his face becomes redder with each blow and his blood starts to boil while he gasps for breath, and then he snaps completely.

He bashes against the malformed walls, the cold clean metal, shattering glass, leaving dents, and despite the atrophy his body has gone through he's still strong enough to create sparks. He can feel the warmth of his anger as grey fragments get thrown back against his cheekbones, as the wind tears his scarf away from his face and he screams, he keeps screaming, running between false alleyways with the crowbar turned against the wall to screech along the stone, to leave a crude uneven scar like a wave rising and falling on the side of a building that may never be finished. It is time to crush this, to crush everything, to wish that a volcanic rift could open right here and suck everything back into the earth, spilling it out to sea, sucking the humanity out of the landscape and leave it as if there was nothing to begin with.

I am consumed with this rage that makes me want to split open the earth, to split the ground in two and separate the earth into halves, to beat the planet down to its very core. I want to destroy it, I am the product of destruction and I am continually born from it, I want to destroy this entire world and

rewrite the rules, to undo so much. What good has this place done me, what heavenly favors do I owe to this world? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Watch me devolve into the monster I've always been, the beast that's always been inside me, the essence of us that lies, deep behind our faces, that urge we get to deconstruct, to ruin ourselves and this place to nothingness. It is the purest form of madness there is, using the tools of man to destroy the creations of man, maddening, maddening anger that only escalates when you realize there's only so much you can do as a single person. There's only so much you can do and it is overwhelming to think how you could make any sort of difference in the face of the rules set against you. How it would be easier if you could rewrite the universe with your own code, if you could become God and shape the earth in your image, the image that you imagined it to be instead of this rotting garbage heap that you find yourself on. You are fighting an uphill battle against the impossible and there's nothing I can tell you that makes this easier to swallow.

I don't like reality. It's always something that—for me—has been difficult to understand, to face, to wrap my head around. I dream in picture books, in stories for children, water-colored in the eyes of an illustrator, of way the world should be—where we learn our painful lessons once and really do believe in these happy ever afters. But they aren't real, they aren't real, and I can't help but cry, cry because I am so angry that I have been lied to, that I can never get that ending, to live in a castle ruling gently with a people who will love me until the end of my days. I want that. I need that. I can't have it.

He'll scream until his voice cracks, giving a faint airy whistle every time he tries to exhale, his throat will taste like iron and salt and he'll wonder if he's snapped his vocal chords, that he's bleeding from the inside out, but he won't care. He won't care because he'll destroy this place first before he lets it destroy him, or so his emotions tell him, emotions that his mind will rationalize as an irrational fever dream later on even though he knows, deep down, that it was true, that it was real, that it was anything but irrational.

It starts to snow.

He hardly notices until an inch has covered the ground, that the wild winter winds rip the scarf off his neck and drags it out into the empty fields behind him, away into an abyss of white and swirling frost. With one last action he throws the crowbar up into the sky as high as he can, over the top of the skeletons before him, and listens from afar as he hears it rattle their bones as gravity pulls it back to earth. He turns around to leave.

Strands of spit hang from around his mouth, stray bands of silver from all his screaming. He trudges, dragging his feet into the outstretched snow, untouched, unsoiled, and he is colder than he has ever felt before—even though the heat from his body, his fever, is reaching new heights, melting each snowflake upon impact instantaneously.

He sees something flapping in the wind, in the distance, through the blizzard. His scarf, stuck around what must be a barren tree, a dying stump.

Oh, and how his heart sinks—he's still blisteringly angry—but it sinks to a depth beyond what he thought was capable when he realizes that it's Halvard.

I'm sure there are a lot of questions, but I won't answer them.

The only part that matters is that Jóhannes walks up to Halvard with the same amount of rage as their last parting, Halvard with the same amount of stoic fear, the same amount of love, and they stare at each other for a minute before Jóhannes, his energy fading, simply walks past him without

doing a thing, and Halvard stays still, doing the same.

Ten paces away, Jóhannes falls to his knees in the snowdrift and begins to wail as loud as he can, the tears that have been in the corners of his eyes this whole time finally fall.

Will we ever be okay?

No.

No.

Oh lord, how I wish I could tell you it was so.

But no.

Seven Buckets of Tears are Enough, Mr. Sørensen

You know, sometimes, it just strikes you.

That movie that you've been putting off. That book that has been on your shelf for fifteen years. That hobby that you keep telling yourself you're going to try. You can say "today is the day that I will do this" but how many times has that worked? No, I think more often you wake up in bed with a feeling, get struck in the moment, with knowledge that today, you will do this. You'll listen to that voice message from an ex-friend, one they left months ago. You'll go to that club meeting and maybe make a few friends who share your interests. You'll knock on the door of your neighbor and say, hey, I'm in love with you. I'm not saying that it is suddenly easy, because your heart will probably be beating in your chest, but it'll be time. You didn't decide it but you know this is the day. You may doubt it, but it feels clear.

You've had the words you've wanted to say in your mind for years now and it is only when you wake up on that early morning, hearing the ravens calling as they circle the lake, that you decide to write them down, on paper.

That it's time to finish this story and start a new one.

Halvard holds his own hand as he walks through the woods. It is a tiny comfort, a security, even though there's no danger, no fear to be had in this familiar forest. His hands are warm and it feels nice, it's nice to interlock your own fingers and pretend, bunch your shoulders in and feel protected just for a moment in the warmth of the day's glow, amongst the leaves and hum of insects. It's nice to love yourself, even if it's fleeting, even if it's still a process.

He finds the remains of a glass bottle in the woods and wonders if people lived in this area before the forest reclaimed it. The shards are old, weathered, and as he tries to reconstruct it he finds that not all the pieces are there, they are missing, and he has nothing that'll keep it all together. Ah, maybe it's a bottle that he brought, maybe this was something that belonged to him some years ago, drinking alone out in the woods and forgetting this part of him behind. He decides to leave what is broken, to gather up the pieces gently and bury them back into the earth and move on, down deeper to see what other things he may discover.

It's the last day. Tomorrow, they'll pack up their bags, clean out the cabin, and go back to their regular lives. Nothing changes despite change, and that's comforting, a little, that you can predict unpredictability, as contradictory as that sounds. Halvard wishes that this, here, was his regular life, where he can weave his fingers through pine needles and be alone as much as he wants. Maybe this is the regular life that he deserves, maybe this is what truly feels regular to him, watching as the dragonflies beat their wings over a small pond he finds in the lowlands, and it is his other life that is foreign, the unregular, the ill-fitted casket that he must wear.

It's okay. All beings, even the inhuman, belong to lives that are not their suited best.

That is not the tragedy.

He half-sleeps in the tall grass overlooking the hillside, shadows of wispy clouds pass over his body, he is buried deep and feels loved here, in this cradle. The sun brings him warmth and the clouds take it away, but it is this fluctuation that feels nice, the variation between light and dark.

When the wind roars, it rustles the long blades that surround him, obscuring and reobscuring as it starts and stops, the immense sound rises him from his half-rest and he smiles to himself.

He sits up, grabs a strand of grass and runs it against his lips before standing, looking down at the valley below and Berwald's cabin in the distance, just a dot in the landscape. He yawns, moves over to a pale rock jutting out of the ground, and sits on it while waiting for nothing in particular.

There is a lot of things that I've been wrong about in my life. I'm still young, but I've lived long enough to believe in truths that I've discovered are not true, only to later be proven that my initial belief was right all along. You watch your values shift, your opinions shift, back and forth, like migrating from place to place with difference plumage, but still the same. I have been wrong, and maybe I still am wrong, but after a while everything blurs and it becomes hard to tell which of your mistakes have actually been mistakes and which victories and triumphs have actually been failures, in the big picture.

You take steps, in a direction, and that's all you can do.

"Hey."

Halvard turns, and Jóhannes waves at him from farther down the hillside, pausing before moving forward.

"Hey," he blinks. "How did you—"

"I asked them where you went and I wandered, until I found you."

Halvard rises as Jóhannes approaches him. He brushes dirt off his shirt while Jóhannes takes a deep breath.

"Do you need something?"

"I wanted to say," he swallows, "that I think you were right."

"About what?"

"That we have a choice," Jóhannes looks at Halvard, sternly, only for a moment before digging through his pocket for a piece of paper, folded up into fourths. "That we have opportunities to make choices."

Jóhannes runs his thumb over the paper square, sighs, and steps forward with his arm outstretched, offering Halvard the slip, which Halvard takes, with some hesitation.

"This is a poem I wrote, for you," and as soon as it slips out of his fingers and into Halvard's, Jóhannes turns around to leave, carefully working his way down the slope to where the ground is flat enough to run, run through the field of winding grass and into the woods. Halvard watches him go, never looking away until Jóhannes slips behind a tree and is gone, only then does he turn his attention to the paper, ripped out of Jóhannes' notebook, the torn edge uneven and lopsided in comparison to the perfect folds.

He can only look at it in his hands for a while, his heart pounding with nerves, the same sort of

anxiety that Jóhannes is having a mile away between the trees. He unfolds half of it, then stops, and takes a deep breath before opening the page.

There's three lines, seven words, and nothing else, written in pen in clean, neat handwriting, unsmudged and drawn with a steady hand, in steep contrast to Halvard's which begin to shake, gripping harder to the tiny page. He has to hold his head back, pointed towards the sky so that his tears won't fall on the page.

It's not a lot, but it says a lot, and it means the world.

The Poem

I'm sorry.

Thank you.

I love you.

The Moral Gray

There's no sign of Halvard for the rest of the day.

But it doesn't feel like there's a person missing from their day. Jóhannes plays with Peter and Nils, letting them chase him around the cabin while Berwald, Henrik, and Tino sit at the table playing chess, taking turns playing the two person game with three people, progressively getting sillier, making up rules, stacking queens atop of rooks and making zigzag patterns across the board in ways that no chess piece is supposed to go. They don't care: it's fun, and the checkered squares are arbitrary anyway, the colors of the pieces don't really matter, the game is not a universal constant and there is nothing preventing Tino from grabbing the two knights of mismatching shades (which Henrik had taped together into a piece he dubbed "Double Knight") and throwing them out the open window. Berwald dunks the queen in his glass of water, claims it has immunity, and moves it onto the board.

"Checkmate," he nods, sagely, as if imparting important wisdom as the water sloshes back and forth inside the glass.

"You're not even *playing* this round, though!" Henrik growls, using more tape to permanently fixate his king to the board, tape that Tino is trying to peel off at the same time using his bishop as leverage. "It's our turn!"

"Am now," Berwald mumbles and seems very pleased with himself. "I win."

"Then I'm going to be second!" Tino shrieks with excitement, freeing Henrik's king and runs out the door with it, Henrik cursing behind him, throwing pawns at him in vain. There's a loud splash coming from the direction of the lake, sounds that continue along with competitive laughter and more yelling.

Berwald looks down at his glass, the queen's crown bobbing just below the surface, and takes a long drink.

Tino bursts back in a few minutes later, soaking wet with aquatic plants hanging off his shoulders, wild-eyed and grinning, knocking Berwald's glass over onto the board as he slams down the king that he abducted from Henrik.

"*Ultimate* checkmate," he pants. Water drips off of the table onto the floor.

Berwald laughs.

Henrik floats outside upon the lake, arms spread wide and looking up into the empty bright blue sky.

"Henrik."

Jóhannes is but a shadow above his head in the sunlight, wide-eyed with pink cheeks with the same sort of bright innocent look that he had as a child. He's still a child, he'll forever be a young boy in Henrik's eyes, but his heart stutters to see Jóhannes looking at him without a heavy dose of skepticism. He is not unruly, rebellious, trying to convince himself he's seen the world and all it

has to offer a thousand times over—he is simply human, curious, and questioning.

“Yeah?”

Jóhannes sits down at the edge of the dock as Henrik rolls, aligning himself vertically and treading water carefully as to not splash. Henrik's shirt sticks to his skin and the curves of his muscles and Jóhannes looks at him quizzically but chooses not to question how and why Henrik became clothed in the lake. The wanting of knowing, the section between the question and the answer, is often sweeter than the truth and it is more fun to dream of the explanation than the reality.

“What is it, Jói?”

“Halle isn't back yet, yeah?”

“Yeah. How did it go?”

“... How did what go?”

“So we're gonna play that game, huh?” Henrik laughs, “I'll play dumb.”

“You know how it is.”

“I guess.”

Henrik jumps, attempting to pull himself up upon the deck, causing the wood to creak and Jóhannes to carefully push him back into the water with one of his feet. “You'll break the dock,” Jóhannes mutters, “and send me floundering with it.”

“It's not a big deal, you can swim!”

“I'd rather not get wet. If you want up, go to shore and walk out here like a normal person.”

“Yeah, yeah, will do, your highness.”

They sit on the edge of the dock for a long time in silence. It is a silence that Henrik eventually breaks.

“I'm not gonna pretend to know what you said to Halle, but you look better. I'm glad you did what you needed to do.”

He offers a hand to Jóhannes, still damp, but welcoming.

“Me too,” Jóhannes says, in a quiet, small voice. “Thanks.”

He takes the offered hand in his and holds it tight.

Neither of them let go for a long, long time.

There's no point in building up suspense: Halvard returns in the evening, coming home and standing in the square doorway without moving, without sound. Berwald is the only one who

acknowledges his presence, the only one in the room who has been glancing over to the doorway occasionally all evening. He locks eyes with Halvard's, tired, puffy, red eyes from all the crying he's been doing all alone in hills where nobody but nature and the otherworld could hear him. Halvard looks down and unlaces his muddy boots while Berwald stands, walks over to where his two children are chatting, and asks them to help him start a fire outside. Halvard sinks back against the wall as they pass him, covering his eyes with a palm, but Berwald pauses, patting him firmly on the shoulder, and whispers something into his ear that makes Halvard crack a tiny smile, if only for a moment.

Tino and Henrik pass him next, alerted to his presence by Berwald's departure, and they leave their card game by revealing their hands on the table and saying nothing. Henrik lingers for a moment, standing behind Jóhannes' chair, brushing a hand through his child's hair before joining Tino in departing. Henrik passes Halvard with a small knowing glance and their fingers brush by each other but neither grasps, Tino blows a kiss to both brothers and laughs, slightly tipsy, shutting the door loudly.

Jóhannes, at the table, blinks wide-eyed with cards in his hand and sniffs. He sighs, setting his hand down, and gets up from the table to walk to the center of the room.

Of course it would happen when he was holding onto a royal flush. He's always been unluckily lucky.

Halvard sighs too—but it's more like shortness of breath, a stuttered sigh that's not confident, not steady, flickering in and out in the same way one stuffs down a breath that begins to waver. He kicks himself mentally, gritting his teeth from his inability to move forward, to tell his legs to move him out of the shadow and into the light, so that he can show that he too has made progress and meet Jóhannes in the middle, but his knees are shaky and his teeth clatter even as he bites harder. He tries to contain himself, compose himself, but he can't, and ever so graciously Jóhannes crosses the room to meet him face to face, eye to eye.

And even though Halvard has to look down to meet his gaze he feels so much smaller—he looks smaller to Jóhannes too. There is something softer about his brother in this moment—Halvard has always been like a broken mirror, taped back together just enough to hold the pieces in place but the sharp broken-edged shards are obvious—but this is different. It's the same version of Halvard that Jóhannes remembers from a long, long time ago, when Halvard was a young nation, a young brother, a young father, inexperienced and without any of the roadblocks and hesitation that has hallmarked most of their recent relationship.

And to Halvard, Jóhannes is different too. It's hurt him to watch his little brother be beat down by life, to watch a bright child lose faith in himself, to lose that curiosity and zest for living, the same losses that Halvard has had. Halvard isn't the only person who was broken and put back together—there's more truth in the claim that everybody is a shattered mess of taped up parts, and Jóhannes is no exception. He's watched this happen—Halvard has blamed himself for the crunching and grinding that has been going on inside Jóhannes' soul, there's nothing worse than seeing the only one you'll ever unconditionally love tear themselves apart in the same manner that you've done to yourself. It's painful to know that you caused some of that. It's worse to have the knowledge that you could've stopped it had the world provided you options to stay with him.

But while that Jóhannes is, and will continue to be until a time far from now, the Jóhannes that stands in front of him is the same determined and self-empowering incarnation that Halvard knew from when they were both so very young.

(Later there will be a conversation in which Halvard admits to envy Jóhannes for these things, traits that Halvard envies but doesn't believe that he has consistently, and Jóhannes will grasp his brother's hands and look into his eyes and says with all certainty that no, Halvard, you've always had them. You've always had them because you passed them onto me. You've always had them because I learned them from you.)

"I-I don't know what to do," Halvard says, stammering a little as his body feels like it is breaking apart. Jóhannes grabs his arm and breaks him from his frozen spell, walking him over to the couch where they sit next to each other. Jóhannes doesn't let him go, his hand lingering around Halvard's loose sleeve. They fumble downward until their knuckles touch, and Halvard reflexively turns his palm and slides his fingers between Jóhannes'.

"I don't know, either," Jóhannes replies, and adjusts his grip before squeezing reassuringly.

You can't promise anything. Everyone knows that for all the certainty you have, all that conviction and resolution until the end, it doesn't guarantee a thing: the unthinkable will happen, that fraction of a percent will fracture your life into equally small and improbably portions. Do all the math you want, all the calculations for all the universes that exist, but to say that you can say something with certainty, that your certainty is unwavering and will never change—don't make that promise when you know you can't keep it.

So it is not then, a roadmap of the future, but memories of the road behind you that you punch holes through and say, we've been there, done that, now what? I'll remember the tracks but I'll let them wash away in the waves of that far away shore until you and I are barefooted and traceless—and then, and only then, can I say that I'm sorry, thank you, I love you, and despite all that I've done and despite all that you've done and despite the powers that connive against this, I've missed you, and I want to be with you again.

"I meant what I wrote," Jóhannes mutters. "I love you, Halle. I'm sorry for the way things have been. Thank you for everything."

Halvard starts crying again, violently, messily, all at once he inhales and sobs even though his eyes hurt so much already. He tries to respond, he tries to say I love you back, that he's also so so sorry, and that he's thankful for all of this, but he can't form them right now. He just cries, death gripping Jóhannes' hand until Jóhannes wiggles his hand free to embrace him, a gesture that Halvard returns immediately, getting the proper reunion that they deserved instead of the one that they had. Jóhannes can't help but cry too, and he too is rendered speechless until their tears dry out and they're both so exhausted that the only thing to do is to go to bed, together, holding each other, stroking each other's hair, and talking about forgiveness and love openly until they sleep.

The splinters will always be there, the regrets that this could have been resolved long ago.

But what is to be said about what you've done, what you've tried, when you feel like you'll never rest from all that battles against you? I think when you come to these tiny resolutions, when you've accomplished something and your soul feels cleansed but you still know the mountains on either side of you are much too high, there's only one thing you need to remember, one thing you need to remind yourself as you review your progression.

It's enough.

It's enough.

It's enough.

Another Midpoint (and let us celebrate the ones that have yet to come)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

On the morning of the end, Jóhannes wakes up feeling warm and safe, opening his eyes briefly before closing them again. He clings to Halvard and Halvard clings to him, intertwined and equal, and he's glad to see his brother sound asleep. Even as Jóhannes shifts Halvard stays still, not a flutter of his eyelids, nothing to prove that he's still alive besides from his slow breathing.

And as Jóhannes moves, nestling his head back against the pillow and adjusting an arm, he knocks into a wrist not belonging to Halvard, a wrist draped over Jóhannes' side and grasping one of Halvard's limp hands. He does not have to turn around to see who is, he knows by sight that it is Henrik's hand, that Henrik had joined them in the night and held them both close. He brushes his fingers against the top of Henrik's knuckles, retracts his hand, and yawns.

It's not accurate to say that the three of them sleeping together hasn't happened since the days long long ago. There's been plenty of communal sleeping, from long international flights where they rest on each other's shoulders, when visits to friends end up running long into the night and they share creaky guest bed, when they've gotten drunk and woken up crusty-eyed, clustered together. The event itself is not spectacular or special, but the feeling behind it, this time, is.

It's hard to describe, but it's one of the many situations that triggers the sensation of home.

"I'm home," is what it feels like, in a cabin deep in the woods in a nation that isn't even theirs.

Jóhannes tries to fall back asleep, but even though he's comfortable, it's a little bit too warm between them in the late morning, so he sweats as the sun peaks in through the window, but he's happy to be here and he'll have no complaints when all they eat breakfast together.

They say the universe may have began at a single point, a pinprick in spacetime where everything remained in perfect harmony before it exploded, radiating, scattering us to different corners of the board. They say that one day this may happen again, where every atom will heed the homecoming call and come rushing back to the source before it starts again, in and out like a breath, a gasp but then a sigh, in search of some equilibrium between the split seconds of change.

And so the three of them meet the other four at the table and share their last meal of this trip, their last collective gathering until the winter. But as the dishes are cleaned and packed away, as things are gathered or forgotten, the rules of nature take hold and like seeds they disperse.

One final swim, one final walk, one final moment alone before the end, before we reach that limit and the universe brings us to our singular point before we start over.

"Check," Halvard nods, sliding a piece dangerously close to Henrik's king.

"I will just keep running," Henrik chuckles, sidestepping and nothing more. Halvard moves again, Henrik traps a piece and makes it his.

"You know he might win this time," Tino says to Halvard, glancing at the board as he carries a

heavy box. When he comes back from loading it into the car, he picks up his dog, gives her a scratch behind the ears, and frowns. “Maybe, actually, a stalemate.”

“It would do more for my record—it's better than a loss, either way,” Henrik yawns and dramatically knocks Halvard’s pawn to the floor. Harvard doesn't smile but he retrieves it and smacks Henrik's hand when he attempts to steal a piece from Halvard’s possession. “You lost it fair and square.”

“Bet’s still on Halle,” mutters Berwald as he passes by with the rest of his luggage. “Lemme know how it ends?”

“You can’t stay?”

“He got a call,” Tino sighs, “this morning, they want him back in the capitol as soon as possible.”

“It’s not like a difference of a few hours is really gonna matter, Ber.”

“Nah,” he straightens his glasses with his shoulder before he walks out the door. “But punctual is good.”

“You could ride back with us!” Henrik exclaims at Tino. “You and the kids could stay longer!”

“We don’t have enough room in the car for everyone,” Halvard takes another piece, muttering quietly.

“Still, we could squeeze everyone in if we tried super hard and gave some of our luggage to Berwald.”

“But then we’d have to send possessions back and forth. It’s not practical.”

“Who ever said anything about it having to be practical?”

“I think I’d rather head to Stockholm,” Tino laughs, “I need to catch my flight back home anyway.”

“You’re heading back already, too?”

“Mhm, I have some of my own business to attend to and I promised I’d go to Estonia after this. Y’know how it is.”

“Yeah. Then we’re all splitting up, really. Jói goes back to Iceland later tonight, I’m leaving Norway the day after...”

“This was good though, for all of us, and there will always be next year, hopefully.”

“Hopefully.”

There’s a lull, in memoriam of all the gatherings that there would’ve been, could’ve been, that never were.

Jóhannes is lucky in that he arrives back to the cabin after his morning walk to the sight of Berwald, Tino, Nils, and Peter getting ready to load themselves into the car and drive back home.

The farewell lingers, taking longer than expected, but it's only a matter of time before Jóhannes finds himself waving down the winding road before they fade out of view.

Inside, Henrik and Halvard are still at their game, narrowed down to the final acts, deep in thought and pausing for minutes between moves. They don't notice when Jóhannes approaches until he smacks his palms down on the table, causing Henrik to yelp in surprise and Halvard to flinch.

"I know how to win," Jóhannes states.

"Oh?"

"Halle can win, if he moves this," he explains, picking up the pieces and performing the moves himself, "and in response, Henrik would probably do something like this—which is a mistake Henrik makes all the time, because it allows you to do this—and then you move this here, and game over, checkmate, Halle wins. On the other hand," he sets the pieces back to their original positions and starts anew, "if Halle moved here, then instead of doing what I did before, if you moved this here, you'd trap Halle in a difficult situation, if you do this and do the opposite of what he thinks and send this from here to here, you only have to wait two turns before you can trap this piece and leave him with no other options other than a slow, painful defeat, checkmate, Henrik has won."

It leaves both of the players starstruck and they can only look at him and back to the board in confused intervals.

"I think that means that Jói wins this round, against both of us, don't you agree Halle?"

"Yes. Congratulations."

Jóhannes smiles.

The chess set is packed away, but all three of them feel weird about taking it back. They decide to store it in an empty cupboard and leave it behind, safe and sound, and Jóhannes is tasked with loading the last of his things into the car while Henrik and Halvard wander the surrounding area, soaking in these last moments that will tide them over until this time next year. They settle atop a gentle hill, one that overlooks the lake and the cabin below, and stand idly as the clouds pass above their heads.

Sun, and then the clouds obscure it, followed by more sun, and in the distance one could call for chances of rain later on. The wind picks up and dies down and it feels nice. It's nice, but not perfect, but to the three of them it feels perfect because they want it to feel perfect, to be a fitting point on the graph where they can measure their progressive changes, watching the slope go up, up, to a high point, a whole value, where an important axis is crossed.

Jóhannes loads his backpack into the car and calls for his puffin who dives into the car and settles down in the space where he'll sit mostly quietly until they arrive at the airport. Jóhannes takes one more run-through of the cabin, making sure everything is put away and done properly before exiting and locking the door. With his door on the handle, there's part of him who wants to go back inside, who wishes he could call back those who have already left and those who have not made it and bring them all back into this space, for another week, another month, a place where everything stands still. They could lie to themselves until the leaves started to fall that time was unchanging.

He places the keyring into a pocket and steps away.

“If ya ever need to come here,” Berwald had said to him before they left, “by yerself, when ya need to, the door is always open.” He hands him a copy of the key and pauses. “*My* door is always open, too.”

“And the same goes for me,” chimed Tino.

“I know,” Jóhannes replied.

“We know you know, but...”

“I’ll act on things, this time,” he had smiled, and they had smiled back, patting him on the back and giving him a kiss goodbye.)

He looks around and sees Halvard and Henrik, still atop the hill, distracted as they both point at a swarm of butterflies flapping by. They don’t notice him, at all, and he manages to take the long way around, circling behind them. His elders don’t say anything, they glance at him as he fills the gap between the two of them, but Jóhannes is focused ahead, at the water below, at the home below, at the car, at the mountains rising higher in the distance. Henrik and Halvard both turn away from him to admire the same view.

Jóhannes slips his hands into theirs, holding them gingerly, then grasping them firmly.

In the future, Jóhannes will grow, grow so much that he becomes taller than both of them, reaching heights that his parents could never reach. They’ll still ruffle his hair, they’ll talk sometimes about how small he used to be, how incredible is it that so much has changed, and by that time their faces will be starting to wrinkle. They’ve always been proud of him despite his fumbling and errors and they’ll still be proud of him, and most importantly Jóhannes will feel proud of himself, he’ll become more confident as the ages go by even if he still stutters during speeches sometimes and embarrasses himself at the supermarket. On that day in the future, when they’ll stand where this hill used to be after it was eroded away by time, when the lake is three times bigger and the cabin has been rebuilt on higher ground in a new location, they’ll be reminded of this moment and how it first felt, that freshness.

It’s a long road to then from now.

Jóhannes lifts their scarred hands up into the air together and he can only smile, he can only laugh quietly and gaze down at the beauty of the land, of every blade of grass and every note of wrensong, the ripples in the water, the aging paint on the cabin, the sun’s circle behind the clouds, high, high above his head. They will all hold each other tight upon that hill and slowly let go as their hands fall back to earth.

“Ready?” Henrik asks to two people who neither reply or react to his question.

But suddenly, Jóhannes nods. “I am,” he says, and Halvard echos those words before Jóhannes grips both of their hands again and runs down the hill with them—the steeper part—nearly tripping but still making it down safely amidst the clattering of soil and stones.

Jóhannes' headphones remain hung around his neck the entire journey, unused but perched where they are comfortable. He plays songs off his phone for all three of them to hear, starting with one that only Jóhannes knows the lyrics too and he sings contently alone until the final chorus until

Halvard and Henrik attempt to join in. The next one they all know the lyrics to and they sing loudly along, louder still as they enter a sudden downpour that drums atop the roof. They'll all end up dry-throated and hoarse, but it will feel good.

And there in the car, in the gaps between songs, Jóhannes realizes that he doesn't want to go back to Iceland right away, that he's in no rush to return there like he's felt in the past, and when they say their goodbyes in the airport, when Jóhannes is three paces away and working on his fourth, he'll turn around and tell them that. That I want to stay for now, just a little longer, even though I know I have to go.

Sometimes I lie in bed at night and I think about the collapse of the universe in upon itself, about how everything is crushed into one, how in that moment of simultaneous birth and death everything is the same, and I wonder sometimes if the new world remembers anything from the old one, if anything crosses over or if it is only the building blocks that remain. If I could tap into that potential, what would I find? I want there to be something because I want to etch into the stars that I existed, that I had two lungs and a heart and I lived, I want there to be some proof that it all matters, that I matter, that what I did mattered, that what I loved and how I loved mattered. I don't know if it makes any difference in the world, but it makes a difference to me, and the universe may be ultimately indifferent to my joy and my sorrow but I do not feel indifference to the universe as the universe does upon to me.

There's a timeline in which Jóhannes turns back around and goes home as planned, there's a timeline in which he decides to stay, there are others in which his flight is canceled, others where he never made it to the airport on time, where he can't make up his mind and has one foot forward and the other behind him. I can't say which future was better, which made him happier, because all roads lead to somewhere and all endings can be happy if you write them yourself.

I can't say which is better, or what is better, but I do know this.

On that day, there was a group of people who felt as if they were wonderful, at peace, that for all the arrows they fired at each other and for all the broken homes that lay in splinters behind them, that there was something fundamentally good about who they were and what they had done.

They felt wonderful.

And they were wonderful.

Redeemed, is the word, or validated.

Doesn't it feel good to be validated, to feel that your pain wasn't for nothing, even if it was?

The sounds of the airport buzz like a swarm of hornets, indistinct and indecipherable.

Listen, I still have a lot of doubts about myself, too. The journey changes a person but how much do you really change? How do you measure your personal growth? It is not a thing that has a guide, there is no person who holds a ruler to your spiritual self and tells you whether you are tall enough to go on the next ride. Am I the same person I was at the beginning? The scenery has changed but what about me? Am I ready for what comes next? Will I ever be ready?

All I know is that I, too, felt wonderful.

And the hopeful part of me believes that I am wonderful.

And that I was wonderful.

Chapter End Notes

The story is over but I have one more chapter to post which is basically extended notes/some personal thoughts that I'll try to have done in the next few days!

I'll do a more extended thank you in the next chapter, but thank you to everyone who read, wrote comments, gave this story kudos, etc!

Some Extra and Extended Notes From Myself

Whew! I'm done! I have a lot to talk about so I will try to break this down into a few sections.

History and Inspiration Behind SoS

The origins of SoS trace back to 2009-2010 when I had some powerful mental images (primarily those surrounding chapters 43-44, which was something I had imagined to the song Rhinestone Eyes by Gorillaz) that stuck with me. It was something that I wanted to write about because they were so powerful to me, but I never wrote them, in large part because after writing for basically all my life, events happened in my personal life that slowly made me become disheartened about writing and slowly stopped and I left the Hetalia fandom around the same time. I occasionally tried to start writing again but I became so angry and frustrated that I trashed anything I started, more or less, and I only managed to write one thing and actually post it in that large span of time. I still thought about things, and would go "I would like to write about this" but I think the influences and people around me in my life at the time were ones that kind of stifled and suffocated me, creatively, and some of that blame I have to place on myself as well. That's okay! Stuff happens and you learn from it.

I also, at around the same time (as in 2010), started generating ideas for a kind of surrealist psychological drama/horror story involving incorrect perceptions with the primary characters and relationship study being between Jóhannes and Halle because I thought their canon relationship was interesting and yet I hadn't really focused on it. I still have pages and pages of handwritten notes/half a typed chapter written, but it was something I ended up trashing too. I still like elements of it and may recycle some of those later into other stories, but the only thing that remained and was recycled into SoS was the primary plot thread being the relationship between Jóhannes and Halle.

Finally, the last memory that I have of my final time in Hetalia fandom was when Múgsefjun released a radio edit of their song Sendlingur og Sandlóa. I thought it was a beautiful song and thought the act of telling a love story through the relationship of a stationary and a migratory bird was lovely. I stopped listening to a lot of music that I really loved for various reasons post-Hetalia, and this was a band that kind of disappeared from my radar as a result of me avoiding large portions of my music collection. When I re-entered Hetalia and re-listened to a lot of old music I hadn't listened to in forever, I remembered how much I loved this song and discovered there was an official recording of it now and an entire new album which I was ecstatic about (as I had been and still am a huge fan of their first album), and listening to that song/album on repeat and imagining things is what really started cohering SoS as a concept together.

Backing up a little bit, when I was initially re-exploring Hetalia, there was part of me that really really wanted to write again for it because I felt like I had grown a lot as a person and I felt comfortable writing my interpretations of these characters, even if my interpretations had changed slightly, and it would be something I felt I could do, maybe, even if I didn't post it online. I really really missed this process of creative writing and to go back to something I was familiar with and loved writing for was really joy-inducing. I never wanted to leave Hetalia to begin and only did so because of people who are no longer in my life, so, I'm glad that I ended up coming back to it.

By chance, I happened to find a post that [zmeess](#) wrote praising my old writing, which shocked me that anyone had read it and liked it enough to talk about it years after I stopped writing. I still had gotten favorites and messages from my old account from time to time but it didn't really hit me

until then that, maybe, the work that I had done and could do was actually good, I guess? Soon after, [tanjerrine](#) also gave me the same sort of praise after finding some of my new writing I did for DenNor 2015 week and recognizing my style/that I had written some of their favorites way back when too. It's a really weird feeling to have people that I perceive to be extremely talented to tell you that you are talented and I'm still just like HAHAHAHA NAH!!!!!! about it to some extent. I don't think my writing is bad but I mean..... look at what both of them can do, it's really incredible.

SoS was also made out of the desire to see if I was capable of writing a longer story. I am not as sharp as I used to be, my memory is much poorer than it was and I honestly do not remember a good chunk of what I wrote in SoS despite spending so much time on it. I often had to go back and reread my own story in order to remember what I wrote so I could write new chapters, to the point that the next day after posting an update I wouldn't even remember what I posted or even wrote about! To some extent I almost feel as if I never wrote SoS at all because I just don't remember entire aspects of it until I rejoy my memory. SoS is the longest piece of writing I've done and I think I did a decent job with it although there's still some things that bother me and I would change if I re-wrote it.

In relation to personal experiences and SoS, there's some clear inspiration. This was not initially intentional for the most part: SoS was intended to be much shorter (around 15 chapters max and finished by the fall of 2015) and did not turn out how I was expecting to in a lot of ways, my initial vision and the final product are almost unrecognizable from each other besides from some plot points. Here's some personal stuff about myself, though, that was intentionally and unintentionally pulled from my life and inserted into SoS.

Travel and distance are things that have been a theme throughout my life. I've moved quite a lot and have been separated from members of my family for long amounts of time given what is generally typical. Most of my friendships have been sustained online for most of my life since I've moved around, and I've often lived in a state of limbo between places. When people ask for where I'm from, I'm never sure what to say: where I currently live now, my birthplace, where I spent most of my formative years, where my parents are from, my first language, my native language, and where I most recently came from have all different answers and I don't feel attached to any of these places. I don't really consider myself from anywhere, really, and I've been nomadic enough that I do not really have a sense of home and have few attachments as a result. Traveling and home/family, kind of became a big crux of SoS' plot because I think they're interesting concepts and I'm quite familiar with the feelings surrounding stuff, as, say, being gone from so long from your father you forget what he looks like, or having mixed feelings about what you consider to be one of your "homes." This part was intentionally chosen.

One of the things with a lot of my old writing was that it was very explicitly a result of what I had gone through/was going through, at least it's very evident to me that this was my way of coping with a lot of awful things going on in my life. There's the whole "does life imitate art or does art imitate life" argument, and previous writing was done under the guise of art imitating life from my perspective. Things happened to me and I adapted them into experiences that I wrote about.

This is where SoS, for me, on a personal level gets interesting, because it ended up becoming a very surreal experience to write because it became a "life imitating art" thing. I wrote about travel and the aspects of what home was and ended up traveling and moving from place to place with no permanent home for a period of six months after my family very suddenly became all unemployed and unattached from everything. I'd write about difficulties of relationships and weeks, days, sometimes hours later, very similar things would happen to what I had just written. It made me kind of angry and frustrated at various points in the process of writing SoS and in part was some of the reason for various delays: it was at times difficult for me to post things echoing what was going on

irl even though I had already written it before those situations took place. This past year and a half has been a strange, terrifying, wondrous, anxiety-inducing, most fulfilling time in my life thus far, I think. I am thankful for it, I am glad I decided to write this, and I consider myself very blessed with the way things turned out.

That being said, I'd like people to form their own interpretations and opinions of SoS. I think it means more to people when you get something out of it rather than me tell you what it all means and what my intentions were. If there is any bottom line in SoS, it's that I want people to think, not necessarily about the story itself, but I want elements of it to cause pause and trigger thoughts and discussions with yourself. If anyone wants to share their thoughts, or their theories about some of the unexplained mysteries of SoS, or what you think was meant by xyz, I would love to see them because I love seeing this sort of analysis as much as I love doing it myself, but there is no pressure to share if you don't want to, because ultimately you create your own version of this story just by reading it.

If there are questions about why I wrote something the way I did, or what something means, I am more than happy to answer those (and I have to the best of my ability for a some people who have asked) but my word isn't rule of law. If you think Halle is wearing a pigeon mask and there is speedcore being played in the distance in every single scene, I can tell you that this wasn't my intention, but there's nothing from stopping you imagining that if that's your interpretation, because I don't think it is my place to tell you what is and what isn't true. Multiple things can be true at once even if they contradict: truth as a concept is not as clear cut as we generally treat it.

I will, however, leave you with one very explicit intentional truth because I do think it is important and I want to very clearly say this.

There is a repetition of "I'm sorry, thank you, I love you" in various ways throughout the story, sometimes reorganized or reworded into an extended phrase and sometimes fragmented and split into parts instead of the whole phrase, but this is one of many very intentional literary patterns in SoS and arguably the most important. Why is that and why was that chosen?

Without divulging too much into my personal history, I am a person who has been mentally ill and neurodivergent for my entire life. I have several learning disabilities, I was first diagnosed as chronically depressed when I was around 10, and in high school I had so much going on mentally in addition to having chronic insomnia that I frequently had issues with hallucinations/delusions about myself, I existed mostly in a state of dissociation, I lost the ability to process emotion entirely for a while, felt that I had shattered myself into fragments and didn't understand who or what I was anymore, etc. It was hard and it took time but it was something that I, for the most part, have overcome.

As an adult, I've learned how to cope with a lot of my mental problems in healthier ways and I have gathered tools for myself to help myself. That isn't to say that everything was suddenly better after leaving high school! I've been severely depressed twice since my worst times as an adult and I've accepted the fact that there's a high chance that it'll happen again. I'm okay with that because I know that eventually it'll pass and I'll get better again with some work and effort.

In 2013 I started entering a severe depressive/anxiety episode that got so bad that it became difficult for me to leave my room, let alone the house. It only grew worse and I became mad at myself because I, objectively, was not in as bad of circumstances as previous bouts of depression, but I became frustrated with my own inability to do simple things and took it out on myself. An inability to do something simple made me anxious and self-hating, which in turn caused it to become more difficult to do that thing, which caused more anxiety and basic things would cause

me to spin out of control and only isolate myself further until I became so spun up that I couldn't do anything.

I don't think there's one thing that you can say to someone that fixes all of their problems. Healing and recovery is a really multifaceted, complicated, and non-straightforward process. I think a good way of thinking about it is if you think about the way that wounds heal: you have a lot of different kinds of cells doing different things that all contribute to the healing of an injury and each one of those cells couldn't do it on its own, but as a whole the collective of all these little processes do, just as you often need multiple tools and multiple forms of help to help you overcome any problem, not just mental illness. Then, too, even if you have all of those things working together, you are not going to get a perfect fix at first anyway. Does skin heal perfectly right away? No, you develop a scab first, which is sensitive and easily broken again, and only over time and with a lot of work does it resolve, and even then you may have some residual scarring for a while. And sometimes you pick your "scabs" off before they heal and relapse! It's happened to me! Sometimes you need ointment (i.e. therapy, medication, assistance from others) in order to help your wounds heal faster and better, too, but it's still a complicated process.

Anyway, in 2013, there was one tool that was introduced to me by another person that I eventually twisted into my own ritual/phrase, and that was saying mentally/occasionally aloud the phrase "I'm sorry, thank you, I love you," in various combinations. When people were getting frustrated with me for how I was behaving, or when I got frustrated at someone, I would try to think in this pattern. Like, "I'm sorry that I'm being difficult right now and I am not behaving right, thank you for still believing in me and trying to help even though I know you're mad, I love you." Sometimes the shortened version of the phrase was needed, sometimes actually giving specifics helped more. Even though I'm more or less fine now it's something that I do still if I'm having a bad day.

It wasn't something that helped all the time either! Sometimes being tougher on myself worked out for the best! But when I was spiraling and really tearing myself apart it was something that would soothe me a little bit until I could calm down more. I mean, it's much more healthy to actively repeat "I'm sorry, thank you, I love you" to yourself than it is to listen to your own thoughts tell you how awful you are.

This wasn't something I was planning to be a part of this story at all: the ultimate poem that Jóhannes gave Halle was actually entirely different than the one I originally thought of and I started writing the first fourth or so of the story with this now scrapped poem in mind. It was really only after things started happening in my own life that radically uprooted me that I was suddenly struck one day with the thought that the poem should be changed to this mantra.

Anyway, I guess what I'm saying is I want to pass the "I'm sorry, thank you, I love you" tool along to everyone who is reading this because it helped me when I needed it and maybe somebody needs to hear that, too.

So, What's Next?

I mentioned this on tumblr already, but I am very much interested in writing a companion story within this same "universe" which is about Alfred and Jóhannes' road-trip and travels through America (tentatively called "In Transit,"). I've already thought about it a lot, but one of my main problems is that I haven't extensively traveled some parts of the country (the entire western half of the US is pretty much unknown to me) but I may make this story an episodic thing, where I can cover the states that I know well now and then cover the parts I don't know well if/when I get a chance to go to them, even if that's years later. Or maybe I'll write it without first person knowledge. I don't know yet.

I have a lot of half-finished fics and fic ideas for Hetalia I need to and would like to finish first though, as well as some original writing I want to do (and hopefully get published to give me some extra money to fund my education). Hopefully I will be writing more frequently now that I am not as busy (although I am still very busy with work/applying for school at the moment) but we shall see! I'll keep writing but I am not going to tackle such a long and labor intensive story like SoS right away! I need a little bit of a break from super long stuff. :p

If people have writing requests feel free to message me? No guarantees that I'll write them but if you have something you'd like to see me try, I'm all ears.

T-T-T-Tracklist!

With my writing process, a good portion of stuff is "written" in my head while I'm out for walks/driving and is later transcribed into a written format later. I usually listen to music on my walks/drives, so I compiled a list of the songs that I often listened to/was inspired by/thought they fit SoS thematically. I don't know if anyone is interested in listening to it, but if you want to get more or less a musical version of the story, this is a good start. Some of these songs came out after I wrote certain chapters, but I would listen to them and go "this reminds me of x a lot and gives the same feel that I wanted" so yeah, just a clarification of dates don't match up, I'm not a time traveler.

[You can listen to it on this youtube playlist here](#) since I haven't found a good alternative that doesn't suck (cough 8tracks cough) but I know youtube itself is really finicky and there's a lot of really infuriating "ohhhh you can't view this because you are not in the right country :) :) :)" (cough the fact i can't re-watch any eurovision 2016 performances at all on youtube at all is absolutely ridiculous cough) so if there is anyone who cannot access certain songs and would like to listen to them either message me on tumblr or down below with some way for me to contact you back easily and I can try to work something out. If I end up finding a better alternative later I will edit this.

Translations are in [] following the song title if the song is not in English. Format is:
Track name - Artist name (anything specific about the song, characters it reminds me of, etc)

[laughing and not being normal](#) - Grimes (Chapter 1)

[Polarize](#) - Twenty One Pilots (Jóhannes)

[Black Sun](#) - Death Cab for Cutie (Halvard)

[Bee Of The Bird Of The Moth](#) - They Might Be Giants (comedic moments, Tino/Henrik, Chapter 20)

[Come A Little Closer](#) - Cage the Elephant (Jóhannes->Halvard)

[Song for No One](#) - Miike Snow (Berwald/Eduard/Tino and Berwald/Henrik, Chapter 9, 19, 29)

[Go](#) - Lemaitre (Henrik, Chapter 21)

[Solitude is Bliss](#) - Tame Impala (Halvard mostly, but Jóhannes at some points too)

[Maailmaparandja](#) [one who is dedicated to fixing the world] - TRAFFIC (Eduard, Alfred)

[Wish You Were Here](#) - Incubus

[Flesh without Blood](#) - Grimes (Everyone at each other at some point, but especially Berwald/Halvard->Henrik and Jóhannes->Halvard/Henrik, Chapter 23)

[Telemiscommunications](#) - deadmau5 feat Imogen Heap

[Seis](#) [stand] - Mick Pedaja (Halvard, Chapter 11, 26)

[Clara](#) - Punch Brothers (Henrik and/or Halvard->Jóhannes, Chapter 13, 36)

[Hjerteknuser](#) - Kaizers Orchestra (Henrik/Halvard/Jóhannes, Chapters 13, 37-39)

[Þá skal flýja](#) [then shall escape, although I think I saw someone translate this as "then, the escape" once?] - Múgsefjun

[This Lamb Sells Condos](#) - Owen Pallett (Berwald/Henrik, Jóhannes/Halvard, Chapter 19, 28, 43)

[Rhinestone Eyes](#) - Gorillaz (Chapter 44)

[Ambulance](#) - Easley (Chapter 44)

[At the Amalfi](#) - Hjaltalin (Jóhannes/Halvard, Chapter 45)

[Violet Hill](#) - Coldplay

[Laugh It Off](#) - Easley (Chapter 32, 47)

[This Is the Song \(Good Luck\)](#) - Punch Brothers (Everyone but especially Henrik/Halvard/Jóhannes, Chapter 32, 47, 48)

[The Heart of Me](#) - Miike Snow (Chapter 48)

[Sendlingur og sandlóa](#) [Purple Sandpiper and Common Ringed Plover] - Múgsefjun

[What Do You Think Will Happen Now?](#) - Owen Pallett (the Author (and by that I don't necessarily mean myself and that's all I'm gonna say))

Other References and Inspiration Asides From Some Stuff That is Explicitly Mentioned In-text Already

There's probably a bunch that I'm not aware of/still missing so if I end up-rereading SoS to see if I have any text errors still and find stuff, I'll edit this? But off the top of my head:

In addition to the music I listed, I listened to Grimes' album Artangles and a lot of Owen Pallett but especially his Heartland album while writing/thinking about this story.

Chapter 15's title and some of the elements within that chapter are based on The Night on the Galactic Railroad by Kenji Miyazawa, which I have never read but those same elements that I borrowed from it are used very heavily as themes in both the anime series Mawaru Penguindrum and the Hatoful Boyfriend: Holiday Star (yes this is the pigeon dating sim sequel yes I think the series has great writing as a whole and I love the last two acts of Holiday Star), two series that I really enjoy(ed).

Chapter 45's title is a nod to the song "Sju bøtter tårer er nok, Beatrice" (Seven Buckets of Tears are Enough, Beatrice) by Kaizers Orchestra. The Violeta Violeta albums by this band have been a big source of inspiration for me and I can't help but leak some of that through sometimes.

Thank You

I want to thank [zmeess](#) first because what they said about my old writing was the thing that really pushed me off the fence in terms of returning to writing and made me really feel that I ought to. Thank you for being one of the major things that initially inspired me to come back to something I really missed and I don't think this story would exist without you. I'm thankful every day that we've become close.

To [tanjerrine](#), thank you for helping me feel more confident about writing. I know we don't talk as often now but I wish you so much happiness and I think about your letter a lot and it was one of the things that really sunk home for me that all the hard and difficult choices that I had to make over this past year and a half were worth it and had some greater purpose beyond myself.

The people that have stuck by me during the course of me writing this story: thanks for being there, thanks for understanding what was going on, thanks for continuing to be there. I really

appreciate all the support I got in all the various forms I received from you.

As strange as it sounds, I'd also like to thank the world in general, especially the natural world, for just being there, and letting me experience what it's like to be alive and it's just so wonderful to learn and discover and experience all the things around us and I am ever so grateful for that!

To everyone reading, to everyone who left nice comments and kudos: thank you. I was super anxious initially about writing again and the response I've gotten has been overwhelming and the comments have been so kind and I'm glad this story resonates with people and some people have found comfort and solace and strength in it. That's really all I could ever ask for, and I hope that all of you find your way and find a balance in your life through all of the ups and downs, and truly have moments where you sit there and find peace and calmness within yourself that is warm and good.

I am always up for chatting here or on tumblr ([pyrrhocorax](#) for my hetalia blog or [biophilie](#) for my main (which is mostly shitposting)) and I more than welcome you to come converse with me about anything.

Thank you, and I love you!

Until next time,

Pyrr

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!