

Chapter 1: Behind the starting line

"Rannveig made love to a matchstick, and out came little Tormod!"

There was a time - well, years - when that familiar taunt used to send him into a blind rage. That was what they were after, of course. It made it easier for them to beat him up, if they could get him to attack them or at least threaten them. And there was nothing they enjoyed more than bullying him, so it seemed. As if they had nothing more important in their life.

"Would you cut it out? This is our last year in middle school. Don't behave like small kids."

"Who are you calling a kid? You who barely even have down on your upper lip yet?"

That was true as well. His mother had explained it to him often enough: He was not really small and weak and clumsy and stupid. He was just growing more slowly than other kids. Even his heart was beating a little more slowly. "It means you are going to outlive them all. And when they stop growing, you will catch up with them, and pass them by. You will be stronger than everyone, just like your father. Please, when that time come, don't take revenge on them. They do not know what they are doing. They know neither you nor your father."

The problem was that he did not know his father either. His parents had only known each other a short time, and evidently conceiving him was pretty much the last thing they did before his father left. Left this world, if his mother was to be believed. Not 'left this world' as in died, but went back to his own world, wherever that was. Tormod had believed all of that when he was a kid. But now he had a really hard time doing so. He had read fantasy books and mythology, and he suspected very much that this was where his mother had found the inspiration for her stories about his father. Or perhaps his father had, and the younger Rannveig had been simple-minded enough to believe him. Falling in love can make people crazy, he had heard and lately even seen that. But he had not felt it, and hoped he never would.

One thing was certain, if he ever fell in love, it would be very much a one-way thing. Nobody even liked him, except his mother. Not even his grandmother. When she was angry - and that happened quite a bit - she would sometimes call him "the bastard kid". He had asked his mother why she stayed and took care of grandma when she was so ungrateful, but she had just answered: "We do what we can, because we must." After the accident, her mother needed help every day. And so Rannveig had returned to the village - small town was too generous a name for it, although it did have its own school at least - and there she had stayed, working for the municipality and taking care of her mother, his grandmother. His only known grandmother, since his father's family was unknown.

If he looked like his father - and his mother said he did, very much so - it should not be impossible to find them now in the age of the Interweb. There could not be many who had such a bright red hair and such grass green eyes as he had. Most redheads had some nuance to their hair, not the pure redder-than-copper color of his. Surely his relatives would stand out as much as he. But he had no idea where to look or how to

search. He had tried to use his mother's laptop computer to search, but "bright red hair" gave tens of thousands of hits, including many pictures, but none that looked like they could be his father. Most of the pictures were of women, actually, and they were almost all very pretty. But he doubted they were his relatives. The hair was a little different, and the face was a little different too. The bones of his face were just a little different, and his pale freckled skin as well.

Today had been a good day so far: No one had beaten him or kicked him, just taunted him and threatened him. Perhaps things were taking a turn for the better, finally. Or perhaps it was because the school year had just started, and they had not yet warmed up to the regular bullying that had been his lot since the day he first set foot in the worn old school building.

Tormod did not remember much from the time before they moved to Heiedal. He knew they lived in an apartment in the city, and he was in kindergarten while his mother was working, and people already thought he looked funny. But it was nothing like coming to this large village that was still small enough that everyone knew everyone, and he was the only one who did not belong. It was here he started school and was instantly disliked. He did not understand the way people acted here, he did not even speak like them, and he still looked different. This was also the first time he noticed that he was smaller and weaker than everyone else. This had continued until puberty. In fact, it had kept getting worse. And when the other boys reached puberty, he was still a boy. Judging from when they grew hair in different places - it was kind of hard to hide when they showered after P.E. - he was about two years behind the average, and at least one year behind the next slowest kid.

There were other things, of course. But mostly, he thought, it was because he was the easiest to beat up, so everyone would happily do so, given any excuse. Or no excuse at all, when they were smaller. Just attacking someone out of the blue was getting less respect now, so he tried his best to not provoke anyone. They would still do their pranks, but at least some days he could avoid getting actually beaten or kicked.

In second year of middle school he had discovered fantasy and mythology, and read all he could find of it. He felt that he was one of the heroes he read about, someone who was born with a special destiny. Unfortunately, no one else believed it, and his destiny as usual ended up being beaten and kicked until he cried. And so at the end he had concluded that no, he was not a special hero and the last son of the royal family. His mother had probably made up all the stuff about his father coming from another world. Perhaps it was like Santa Claus, and he had been stupid enough to swallow it even as far as in middle school. The joke was on him, then. Now, all he could do was survive until he grew up. He was fairly sure of this one thing, at least: He really was growing more slowly than other kids, but there was no particular reason why he would not also grow after the others stopped.

But even if all else failed, even if he remained weak and clumsy and barely average

smart for the rest of his life, there would come a time when the rules of civilized society began to kick in and it would no longer be acceptable for random people to kick his feet out from under him when he passed them in the corridors. Exactly when that was, he was not sure. From what he had heard, there was still some of this in high school. But at some point surely everyone would grow up, or at least many enough that bullying him would no longer be cool. He just had to survive. Luckily he was sick a lot, and had to stay home for days on end. Long may it last. The more he was sick, the better his odds of survival. That was how he reckoned.

Just before the end of summer break, Tormod had a special dream. No, not one of those about girls. He had had a few of those too over the last year, and they seemed to be coming more often. But this was different. He dreamed that he was out in the dark wilderness, some unknown place. Ahead he saw a bright light, and he ran toward it. As he came closer, he saw that it was a kind of gate or portal into a light so bright, he could see nothing on the other side. It was as if the doorway itself was made of pure light. But as he drew closer, it was shimmering and swaying, then flickering, and he was afraid that he would not reach it. He ran as fast as he could, because he was absolutely certain that something important would be lost if he failed to catch it.

The bright white light was faltering as he arrived, but he managed to reach ahead and plunge his arm into the portal of light. Immediately bright energy raced up his arm, coursed through his whole body and exploded in his head with a pleasure and a force that blew every thought away. And something spoke directly to his mind. If it was in any language at all, it was a foreign one, and utterly unknown. And still he understood exactly what it said in his head:

WELCOME HOME! RECEIVE NOW THY ANCESTORS' GREAT POWER AND WISDOM!

And then, the light ripped him apart like dust on the wind, and he spread among the stars.

He woke up in a sweat, his heart hammering like it tried to escape his chest. A part of him was sure that if he could have stayed in the dream, he would have reassembled on the other side of the gate of light, in a magical world, perhaps the one from which his father came. But the normal part of him, which gradually gained the upper hand, knew that there was no such world, that he had read too many fantasy books, and that it was just a dream after all.

Ever since then, he had felt ... different from before. Just a little. It was not like the delusions of grandeur that he had tried to share with the world during his second year. Well, not quite the same. This was a secret. He was reluctant to mention it even to his mother. He knew it was not real, but he treasured the dream anyway. He had never felt anything like it, not even during those other dreams, the ones with the girls. Those were all about the body, but here, in this dream ... it was his heart, his soul, his very essence that had been caught up in an ecstasy beyond words, beyond imagination itself. And he wished he could dream it one more time.

Dreams fade with time. But then one September day something happened, and it was not in a dream. It was a very ordinary school day, and Tormod was on his way back to the classroom after the break. He was in his own thoughts, although later he could not remember what those thoughts were, for he was shaken out of them very suddenly. As he passed a couple of his classmates, suddenly one of his long-time tormentors named Roger kicked sideways, with perfect precision kicking the legs out from under Tormod. And with his already lousy balance, he had no chance to catch himself. He flapped his arms comically and fell, trying to catch himself with his left hand. The pain as he landed with all his weight on his wrist shot like a lightning through his arm all the way to his brain, and everything disappeared.

Everything disappeared, then reappeared instantly. He was further down the corridor, back the way he had come, and was in the middle of walking toward his classroom. This was where he had just been! He stopped. He felt his wrist, it was perfectly fine. There was no pain. There was nothing out of the ordinary - except that he was fifteen meters away from where he had fallen, and nobody was looking. Well, that was not quite true: Looking directly at Roger, he could see the other boy glancing at him out of the corner of his eye, with the expression he would have when he had some evil idea. And over the whole was this intense feeling of *deja-vu*. Because, well, he had *deja* viewed it. This was him, ten seconds or so ago.

He had stopped, and now he carefully steered over to the other wall, keeping such a distance that the other boy would have to actually walk over and deliberately attack him in plain sight if he wanted to cause him trouble. He could see that his old nemesis was not going to do that this time. He knew he had somehow been found out, and resigned himself to looking for another opportunity later. Tormod made it safely to his desk.

But what had happened? He could remember very clearly being kicked down by his classmate, falling and hurting his hand badly. But that clearly did not happen. Somehow he had found himself back to before that happened, that was how it looked. Had he traveled through time? Or had he received an incredibly lifelike vision of what would happen, and then changed his path so that it did not happen in real life? Either would be as fantastical as something out of a fantasy book. Could something like that really have happened to him? Was he special after all? No, that way lies madness...

Tormod came home before his mother, as usual. He was not going to eat dinner before she came home, but he was hungry and went to grab a glass of milk. His grandmother was drunk again. More than usual actually.

"I don't like you being here in my house" she said by way of starting a conversation. He was not exactly surprised by the attitude, so much as with the honesty, if such a word could be used about extreme rudeness to the legally underage.

"My mother likes me being here" he said. "And you like her being here. Well, at least you need her being here, which is what counts."

"It's my house and I should be able to decide who lives here."

"Certainly. Call for one of your innumerable other children and grandchildren who are still alive and let them take our place."

That was an extremely low blow, considering that she had, quite accidentally, killed her only other child and grandchild during the drunk drive that cost her the use of her legs and one hand. But then, having someone who basically lives as a parasite telling you to leave is known to induce some negative feelings. He knew that his mother was paying all the bills here, his grandmother hoarding her pension for herself and spending nothing except on booze.

"I wish I could just kill you" she stated as a matter of fact.

Well, there went his remorse.

"I think you have killed plenty enough for a lifetime."

"Go back to hell. My life has been nothing but misery since you came to this world."

"Go back to bed. You are just making more misery."

"Do you think I can't see you for what you are? You may be able to fool the rest of them, but not me. I know what you are, hellspawn."

"I've been promoted from bastard?"

"You ruined my daughter's life. Then you ruined mine. You killed my family. You!"

"Keep talking to yourself, perhaps you are listening."

"I knew it the first time I saw your eyes. 'The kid got the evil eye' I said to myself. And sure enough. Everyone you're looking at is cursed. But you're not getting away with this, demonspawn, don't think you are. You are going to burn in hell for all eternity. Burn and burn and burn and burn. And I'm going to watch and laugh for all eternity."

"If I know one thing, it is that should I ever end up in hell, you'll be there waiting. So there's that at least." He drained his glass, rinsed it and put it in the dishwasher before going to his room.

Hellspawn? Demonspawn? Evil eye? Evidently she was the only one except his mother who really thought his father was not quite of this world. Well, it would be kind of cool to be a demonspawn perhaps, but it was rather the opposite of what his mother had told him, that his father was some kind of demigod or natural wizard from an alternate earth. Of course no sane person believed that. Even he had stopped believing. But his grandmother, evidently, sensed something in him. And he was not entirely sure which of them was most right.

Tormod told his mother about the episode with his grandmother. Well, not in detail, since the details were not so flattering for him either. But the part about calling him hellspawn and claiming that he had cursed her and the rest of the family with the evil eye. Perhaps he had hoped that she would take his side and do something about the crazy hag. But no.

"My mother used to be religious when I was a child. Well, it was mostly my father, but she went along with it as long as he lived. I think some part of her still believes in Heaven and Hell."

"Drinking won't get her to Heaven."

"She has had a great deal of sorrow in her life. When my father died so early, her faith died with him. It was as if something inside her broke that could not be repaired. I want you to understand that she is not as evil as you may see her. She is just a confused

woman, grown old before her time, having lost everything she cared about."

"Well, she still has you."

"In a manner of speaking. But after I met your father and had you, she no longer has my undivided attention. I think she is jealous of you. And she always preferred my sister anyway."

"Your sister, who she killed by driving drunk."

"It was not as easy as that. You may have heard it like that, but people don't tell the whole truth, and a half truth can be a whole lie. It is true that she was drunk. She was often drunk. After my father died, she lost her faith as I said, and took up the bottle instead. She was sober at work, but drunk from Friday afternoon til Sunday night. Sometimes on other nights as well, although not as much. And so it happened that she was drunk when my sister suddenly fell ill, and decided to drive her to the emergency room. And there was no one to look after the baby, so they took her with them in the car as well. Perhaps she should have called for a taxi. She probably thought she was not as drunk as she was. Well, it went horribly wrong. So now she has that to torment her as well."

"I never knew about the emergency!"

"I don't remember if I've told you before, but I guess you don't remember it at least. You may have been too small to pay much attention to it at the time, and I thought perhaps you knew. But clearly you did not."

"No, I didn't! But she still has no right to call me a demon."

"No, your father was not a demon. He was the kindest, gentlest man I have known. He was amazing in every way. And I am sure you are going to grow up to become like him. And when you come into your powers, I beg you to not take revenge on your grandmother. She is a broken soul, living in endless pain. Please heal her."

"I can't heal anyone."

"Your father could. I am sure it is only a matter of time before you also have that ability."

"Mom, sometimes I wonder whether you are serious. My father can't have been an alien wizard from a parallel world!"

"I am not quite sure what he was, but he was not of this world, and you are his son. One day, I am certain of this because he promised it before he left, you will inherit your ancestors' great power and wisdom."

"WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?" Tormod had jumped out of his chair.

"He promised me before he left that I would give birth to a son, who would inherit his ancestors' great power and wisdom. And here you are."

"That's what the voice in my dream said. *Inherit thy ancestors' great power and wisdom.*"

"Perhaps I told you this before?"

"Perhaps." That had to be it. Still, he had no memory of it, not until that dream.

Chapter 2: So you want to be a wizard...

Tormod hated P.E. Hated, hated, hated. More than any other class. Actually, he did not really hate other classes. They were hard, but he did well enough. His mother had taught him to study effectively even since he was a child, and she would still help him with homework, or at least make sure he did it all. Being prepared helped a lot in class as well, so he could more easily follow what the teachers said. Perhaps he was imagining things, but it seemed that lately it was getting a bit easier too. Well, the tests would show eventually. It was still October and not much change so far.

In P.E. on the other hand ... Well, he hated it especially when they had ball games, because the other boys would throw or even kick balls at him as hard as they could, well some of them especially. But today was not ball game, so at least he did not have that to worry about. But as the weakest boy in class, it was still pretty uncomfortable. Everything that was more challenging than strolling around for the average boy his age was a bit of a challenge for him. And the other boys would laugh and taunt him when he failed at something easy. Like lifting himself up repeatedly with his arms. This was easy except for the two obese kids, but it was pretty hard for him. Last year he could not do it at all. Even though he was not overweight, he could not pull himself up. He was that weak. This year he could, but not as fast or as long as the others. And it was the same way with anything else, whether it was about strength or speed or agility.

"You are getting better" said his P.E. teacher. "Last year you could not do it at all. But you still have to practice more. Practice makes perfect. You will never get strong without training. Press yourself and you will get strong. It is physically impossible to keep exerting oneself and not grow strong eventually."

Tormod was not so sure about that. When you were biologically two years younger than other boys your class, it was not really realistic to catch up with them. It was not like he had unlimited time on his hand to do both his homework and physical exercise. He already had too little fun as it was. And if he had to choose, he would definitely work on improving his grades in math, writing and other skills that could actually lead to employment at some future time. He was highly unlikely to ever get a job as a circus strongman!

"There is a letter for you" said Tormod's mother one rainy day. "Well, I would assume it is for you anyway." She smiled and handed it to him. It was an actual physical envelope, from their mailbox, but there was no postage stamp on it. Written in elaborate girly handwriting on the front was:

Arch-Wizard Thormodus Magnus

For your eyes only!

OK, someone still remembered that embarrassing stunt from 2nd grade of middle school. OK, it was not that long ago. It was not like people did not still taunt him about

it, even though he had recovered from his wizard fantasies after only a few months. But that handwriting - could his enemies fake that, or did they actually have a girl in their league now? Nothing was impossible, but mostly girls had just kept their distance, rather than actively taunting him, much less physically attacking him. They did not bother him and he did not bother them. That was as much as one could hope for in this world. Until now. He opened the envelope cautiously. It contained nothing but a letter and a small hand-drawn map.

The Secret Underground Club of Witches, Wizards, Summoners and Magic Users, HigherDale Chapter, requests thy assistance. As thou hast so far chosen to ignore our telepathic summons, we have gone to the step of sending thee this physical note, at the grave risk of being discovered by the local muggles. At the original inspiration for our Secret Society, we would be honored if thou wouldst bestow upon us thy presence during our Secret Chapter Meetings on Thursday evenings at 17:30, where we study the Secret Arts. Having a Natural Born Alien Wizard Semi-Demigod among us would without the slightest shred of doubt magnify our progress. Naturally, we trust thee to keep this a secret from the muggle population. The enclosed map will take thee to a designated meeting point from whence we will proceed to the actual hideout of the Secret Society upon thy arrival.

Respectfully,

Andrea Montana Maxima, Dark Witch of Darkness

Andreas Montanus von Finkel, Summoner Extraordinaire

Maarten Dragonus Rex, Feline Liaison

OK, that would probably be Andrea and Andreas Berg, the twins that were currently in 2nd grade of middle school. If it really was them, they would probably be harmless. Andrea was an actual girl and as such unlikely to physically attack him. Andreas was physically no stronger than himself, or barely so. He had no idea who Maarten was, though. Perhaps his chosen title would give some kind of clue. Tormod could usually borrow his mother's laptop when doing homework, so it should not be too hard to find out what a feline liaison was.

And so, when Tormod somewhat cautiously approached the X on the map, he was not overly surprised to find the Berg twins, dressed all in black and with black hats, and a slightly overfed black cat with white paws, presumably Maarten the feline liaison. No one else was in sight. The twins also seemed to be on a sharp lookout, but evidently they were soon convinced that he came alone.

"Ah, master Arch-Wizard, you arrive in your muggle camouflage to avoid notice. Very resourceful." Andrea curtseyed. Did kids these days even know how to do that, or had she learned it from the Interweb somehow? "If it pleases you, we shall now proceed to our secret magickal lair."

A few minutes walk away, out by the old bogs, was an old small wooden hut that had been used to store peat, back in the days when peat was a useful resource for fuel and for insulation. The gray wooden walls had survived a couple generations of neglect, but were not likely to do so for another generation. The roof would probably not come down

on them anytime soon, though, unless they did some kind of violence to it. Inside were three collapsible garden chairs, a collapsible garden table, and a chest so large that they had probably carried it between them -- Andreas was not a particularly muscular boy even for his age. The twins set up the furniture with fluid motions; clearly they had done this before. Andrea placed on the table a couple large books, a black binder with pages of black stiff paper and a bright red gel pen. Finally she placed a black candle on the table. "Does anyone have a fire spell?" she asked, eyeing Tormod.

He shook his head. "Unfortunately, I do not have the requisite degree of precision with pyromancy yet." He did have the terminology, at least. He did read all kinds of literature about wizardry and related topics during the months leading up to his embarrassing outbreak of claiming to be an alien wizard, although for some reason the notion of feline liaisons had somehow passed him by.

"Very well then." Andrea put her hand in her pocket and tried to hide the lighter as she made exaggerated gestures toward the candle. "Let the secret Dark Flame of Forbidden Knowledge be kindled anew!" She lighted the candle, which - despite its color - burned with a very natural looking yellow flame.

"Now then" said Andrea as they sat down on three sides of the small table, the wall at the fourth, and the cat busy with a tiny quantity of catnip in the corner. No wonder it had followed them all the way! "As first secretary of the Secret Chapter of Witches, Wizards, Summoners and Magic Users, it behooves me to review the events leading up to and including the founding of our Chapter.

"The founding members, Andrea Montana Maxima and Andreas Montanus von Finkel, were reincarnated in the present era and raised as muggles by parents who believed themselves to be muggles, their ancestors having forsaken the Arcane Arts during the Age of the Great Persecution. Thus, although the twins, sharing an eternal bond, were actually magick wielders through both spirit and blood, they grew up unaware of their heritage and destiny. And this is where the story could have ended, if not for the incarnation of a powerful semi-demigod, Thormodus Magnus, who was born into this world as the fruit of the forbidden union between a mortal woman and an alien wizard from an alternate dimension. Courageously teaching the existence of the magickal dimensions, he was predictably persecuted by the muggles, yet refused to unleash his vengeance upon them. Inspired by his example, the mageborn twins remembered their destiny and decided to study the Arcane Arts, to reclaim the great power that was their birthright. However, due to the grave consequences of persecution, they decided to perform their secret studies in secret, in a remote locale consecrated to the Arts."

Andrea looked up from the binder. "Thus concludes the Chronicles of the Founding of the Chapter."

As the twins were looking expectantly at him, Tormod felt compelled to say something. "So, what kind of Arcane Arts have you been focusing on thus far?"

"As a Dark Witch of Darkness, I have been studying ancient formulae for empowering our allies and confounding our enemies. I am currently in the process of assembling a grimoire of spells and rituals that will aid us in our future ventures."

"And I am an Arcane Summoner" said Andreas. So, he was at least somewhat more

active in the plot than their feline liaison over in the corner. Tormod had not been entirely sure whether this was a one-girl show and her twin brother was just trailing along as a living prop. "I am studying how to contact and eventually summon beings from other dimensions. I have already succeeded in piercing the Veils of Time and summoning our ancient familiar, the Black Dragon, into the body you see accompanying us today."

The twins were practically beaming with pride. The cat seemed pretty happy too, although that might be because of the catnip. He had promised himself that he would never again mention his embarrassing fantasies to anyone, but ... He could not bring himself to rain on their parade.

"Excellent work. I am proud of ye both ... all. I hope ye will understand that I cannot simply casually demonstrate my abilities ... my ancestors' great power and wisdom. Such power without sufficient refinement of practice and elaboration of ritual could have devastating consequences. I will however be willing to supervise your training for the time being."

"You have our gratitude, Master Arch-Wizard. We await your directions for our future studies."

"Well, for the time being I need you to bring me up to date on your results so far, after which I shall devise a path into the future. I cannot simply extract this information from your brains, as your less experienced minds might be shattered by the impact. Again, as mentioned before, great power is a dangerous thing without sufficient refinement."

Why did the words roll so easily off his tongue? Nothing good was going to come from this.

It was a strange feeling for Tormod to wake up and know that there were two people out there, apart from his mother, who did not hate him. That was probably temporary: Once they outgrew their magic fantasies, they would probably hate him like never before. But for the time being, he was safe. They had said and done so many embarrassing things, they were not exactly in a position to mock him. And they had no evidence that he knew of. He supposed they could have recorded the sessions and edited out themselves, but he was pretty sure he would have noticed anything such. After all, he did notice Andrea's lighter easily.

He had learned about their "magickal studies", and as expected, they were mainly gathering data from the Interweb, much as he had done. He was still comfortably ahead of them, though. So he could "direct their studies" for a while, at least, without too much effort.

In other ways, however, life continued much like before. He still had a lot of school work to do. It seemed a little easier than last year now, but it was not like he could breeze through it. Still, perhaps he was finally starting to catch up with everyone else? Even his P.E teacher had said that he was improving a little. His mother had always predicted that when other kids stopped growing, physically and mentally, he would

catch up with them and perhaps even surpass them. Well, there was hardly any surpassing in sight yet, but perhaps he was struggling a bit less.

Unfortunately the weird time jump warning had not occurred again despite several pranks by the boys in his class. Perhaps it was because they were not actually breaking any bones, which he suspected would have happened that time when he suddenly found himself fifteen seconds in the past. Or perhaps it only worked under some other very special circumstances. Or perhaps it only worked once. Or perhaps he had imagined the whole thing. It would not be the first time his imagination ran away with him, if so. And the Berg twins were living proof that imaginations could get totally out of control, if he had managed to forget that from his own life. Every time he even thought about them, he automatically remembered the time when he was really into these wizard things and took them deathly serious, and he cringed inwardly. But still, to have something almost close to friends in real life, not just in books? Yes please. They might have youthful delusions of grandeur, but he still liked them. The cat was pretty cute too.

On the last day of October, Tormod's mother congratulated him. He was confused: It was not his birthday, and it was still almost two months till Christmas. So he asked what she was talking about. She smiled: "You've not been home sick from school even one day this past month."

It was true! He had in fact not been sick at all, except a light cold at the start of the month, which they decided he could go to school with. It was just a runny nose, nothing that would disturb class or even himself much. He was also not particularly opposed to infecting the other boys, who were the only people likely to come close to him, and then only if he could not avoid it.

"I've kept track of all your sick days from you were little" she continued. "I got pretty good at finding out when you were really sick and when you just did not want to go to school. And I could not hold it against you if you exaggerated your sickness a bit, with the terrible things you went through at school. I would have let you stay home even more if I could, but it got so bad in grade school that the school contacted Child Protection Services, and they contacted me, making vague threats about taking you away if I kept you home from school that often without doctor attestation. I never told you. It was all I could do to not go set their offices on fire, you know. You came home from school with blue and yellow bruises, dirty and torn clothes from other boys beating you up, and you were the one they wanted to punish. Well, me perhaps, but it certainly would not have been a dance on lilies for you either. And so I sent you to school if I thought you were sure to survive it."

"Mom, that is so messed up. I never knew."

"That's probably a good thing. You had enough fear in your life without the fear of being abducted by strangers."

"Well, it could have been worse. They could have given me to Grandma. She would probably have literally killed me."

It was true, however. He had not really thought about it, but his health had improved

this fall. Was this too part of his growing up? Right now, he felt quite fine. He would surely fall ill again, as all humans did. Looking weird did not protect him against all illnesses - only the moderately contagious ones, since he was less in contact with other people. But he was too much in contact with the bullies as it was, although the contact was mercifully brief. It was not like they rubbed up against him. Neither did the Berg twins, although their cat did. Tormod had a brief, uninvited image of Andrea rubbing up against him, but pushed the thought away before it could incapacitate him. Their relationship was not like that. He was her mentor, for a short time at least, and mainly in a purely theoretical way. It was something she had come up with, and he was just playing along. It was not like any of them had that kind of thoughts about each other. At least not if he could help it. Even if he was a healthy young man now...

With the coming of November, the weather cleared up a little after a long fall of rain and wind. It was still not winter, even up here in Norway, but it could set in before the month was out, rare as that was these days. Their teacher told them that winter used to come earlier in the past. That said, last winter, when it came, was the hardest in decades. Hopefully it would not be quite that bad this year. One thing that was unavoidable, however, was the deepening darkness. Days became shorter and shorter, nights longer and longer. You might not notice it much if you spent your evenings indoors, with all the bright electric light. But walking to the Peat House - or "Super Secret Magic User Hideout" - drove home the fact that they were entering the dark season for real. For good measure the moon was at its darkest the first weekend of November, not that they had seen much of it for the past month or more.

Andrea Montana Maxima, the Dark Witch of Darkness, had even taken to painting her fingernails midnight black. That did not stop her from lighting a small candle rather than bless the darkness, and chief summoner Andreas Montanus von Finkel had brought a flashlight for their trip home. He had still managed to summon the Black Dragon Feline Liaison, despite the deepening gloom.

"Today" said Arch-Wizard Thormodus Magnus, "I have been asked to say a little bit about spells. You have already researched some spells, and you may have noticed that there is a great variation of them, and not all of them work right out of the books.

"Fiction makes spells look easy and simple. You point your wand, you intone the magic word, and magic happens. Maybe that is so in a high-magic, fast-magic world. But ours is a slow-magic world. Notice that our world is still magickal. Take life, for instance. Is life not magickal? Imagine that you found a stone that could grow over the years, and then split off new stones that would roll away and start growing on their own. If we came to a world where this happened, we would all agree that it was a magickal world. But we are surrounded by things that grow, multiply, live and die, and we take it for granted. Fruits that happened to be edible. Cats that happen to have holes in their skin exactly where their eyes are. Of course we live in a magickal world! But it is a world of slow magic, which we also call subtle magic. Even I, a natural born semi-demigod from a higher-magick world, cannot just snap my fingers and shout

FIAT LUX!"

A disoriented feeling, as if being pulled out of time and space.

A tingling sensation as if from a mild electrical current.

A vague but intense memory as if from a forgotten dream.

A wordless observation: Two staring, gaping faces.

A shining ball of light, hovering by the tips of his fingers.

Everyone was staring. Tormod not least. He blinked but it did not go away. A ball of white light, less bright than the candle on the table, but more surprising. Did he just make that? That was not possible. He was just faking it. He just got caught up in the moment, his imagination running away with him. He had imagined snapping his finger and the room would be filled with brightness clearer than daylight, but of course that did not happen. That was what he was telling them, that it would not happen. But something had happened. Something was hanging in the air, remained hanging as he pulled his hand away. A small dim ball of light. But a ball of light nevertheless.

Chapter 3: The unbearable tolerance of mothers

The twins were staring at the glowing white orb that hung motionlessly in the air.

"How did you do that?" asked Andreas.

"Magic?" said Tormod. He was at least as surprised as they, but it would probably be bad form to admit that. They were looking up to him, after all.

"But you said even you could not do that?" said Andrea, the twin sister.

"No, as I was in the process of explaining, even I cannot just say the magic words and fill the room with bright white light as if from a 100-watt bulb or fluorescent tube. All I can make is this glowing ball, barely enough to read a book with large letters. An ordinary magic user might have to train for years and years to do even this, and let me ask you: Is it really worth spending years of your life making a faint light, when you can just flick a switch and make your rooms as bright as day? Even a flashlight is much stronger than this, at least in the direction where it points."

"Well, that is true, but this is magic!" said Andrea.

"As I was saying, there are two types of magic, fast and slow. Fast magic is also called vulgar magic. It requires great force and seems to break the laws of nature. When we talk about magic, this is what we usually mean. But the most useful magic in this slow-magic world is subtle magic, that builds up over time and bends the laws of nature rather than breaking them. It is not as spectacular, but it is more cost-effective."

He was pretty much quoting an article he had recently re-read based on some White Wolf RPG, which he had bookmarked when he was into those things during his own second year of middle school. His mouth kept running, but his heart was in turmoil. Somehow he had summoned a ball of light. That should not be possible. He tried to act all cool, but inside he was like all OMG OMG OMG OMG WTH.

The shining ball image flickered, but as he paid attention to it, it stabilized again. It was as if it required his attention after a time, although it did not seem to require any energy. He tried to remember how he did it. He might talk it down to the twins (mainly because he was not convinced he could ever do it again), but he would dearly love to at least try. If this was something he could train himself to do reliably, it might be a ticket to fame. On the other hand, it might be a ticket to being dissected by the CIA or some other nation's secret services, quite possibly including his own. So a certain degree of caution was in order.

What else was in order was a complete re-evaluation of everything he believed five minutes ago. He had mostly overcome the delusion of grandeur, the belief that he really was the son of a powerful wizard or demigod from an alternate world. He had not even been sure his mother really believed in that, or whether it was just a story she had told him to make him feel less ashamed of being a bastard kid with no father. Well, guess what.

He wished he could go home now. Actually, he would not particularly mind if he could run away screaming. But that was clearly not in the cards. Andrea was on her feet,

cautiously looking at the ball of light from different angles.

"Don't poke at it" he warned. "I cannot guarantee what will happen when alternate-earth demigod magic meets witch magic. This needs further studying before any experiments. Or perhaps we should not experiment with it at all for now."

"It looks like a witch-light, I read about it in a book. I think it was by Barbara Hambly. It seemed to be fairly common in that world. But you are not a witch. You are a wizard. In the Harry Potter universe these are interchangeable, but this is clearly not the case here. You did not use a wand, for one thing, you just snapped your fingers and said ... the magic words."

"Don't be shy. You can say them yourself. The worst that can happen is that they don't work. Probably."

"Since this light is technically a summoned object, I think maybe our Chief Summoner should try it. After all, as you say, it is probably not a witch light."

"OK, here goes!" Andreas snapped his fingers, although it did not make much of a sound. "FIAT LEXUS!"

Nothing happened, as expected.

"It's Lux, not Lexus" said his sister. "And your snapping is awful."

"You try it then!"

"Since you insist." She snapped her fingers audibly. "FIAT LUX!"

Nothing happened, except that the existing ball of light flickered and went out.

"Well, *something* happened" said Andreas.

"I did not mean to!" said his sister, glancing nervously at Tormod.

He had seen it flickering and tried to steady it with his attention as he did last time, but it did not work and he was not sure why. He was not at all sure it had anything to do with the black-dressed teen witch, though. It seemed to him that the glowing image had to be renewed frequently, and he had simply failed at this, just as mysteriously as he had succeeded the first time.

"Don't sweat it. I said our magics might not be compatible without further study. But it was just a ball of light. No harm is done. The candle is still shining and Andreas still has the flashlight. I may make another of these some other day, perhaps, if your training requires it." *And if I find out how I did it. At least I think it was my doing.*

"Mom, I need to talk with you. Alone. Somewhere Grandma can't overhear us or burst in on us. It is important. Seriously."

"Oh dear! You haven't made her pregnant, have you? You are already that age..."

"With Grandma?? Are you crazy? I don't think that is even physically possible, let alone mentally..."

"No, of course not! I mean the girl, the blonde twin..."

"Andrea? No, no! I would not dream ... I would not actually do anything like that. Mom, I am in junior high! I am not sure we are even legal!"

"Yes, you are, since you are so close in age. You could totally bang her and nobody would care except me. I would get very, very upset. Extremely upset. Like, marry her

now and let me raise the baby because you sure as shades can't do it."

"She is not pregnant! At least not with me! Actually I don't think anyone else would want her either. She is really weird. She's dyed her hair raven black, by the way. All of it, and there's quite a bit."

"Yeah, she has great hair. I saw her put that letter in our mailbox that time."

"What? And you did not tell me?"

"You had something important to talk about. Let us go for a walk. It's been a long time since you said something like that to your mom."

Like most houses in the village, their garden was not far from the wilderness. A path went from between two of the neighbors, between two farmers' fields, and to the lightly forested slopes beyond.

"Mom, I made a ball of light."

"That's nice, dear. What color?"

"MOM! I made a ball of light! Out of nothing! I just snapped my fingers and said *FIAT LUX*, and there it was. I can't do it now, though." He snapped his fingers. "*FIAT LUX!*"

"Isn't that slightly blasphemic? Your grandmother would get very upset if you said that at home."

"I wouldn't do this anywhere around her! She is already suspecting me of being a demon. But how could I just make a ball of light? And why can't I do it now?" He snapped his fingers. "*FIAT LUX!*" He felt a little tired, as if some modest amount of strength left him, but nothing else happened.

"Why don't you tell me the whole story. Where were you, why did you do it, who saw you?"

So he told her, as best he could remember. The wet brown leaves squished under their boots as they walked, and he told her about the twins and their magic-user role playing, and him trying to dial down their expectations, and instead this happened. Also how he seemed to have to refresh it every minute or two, and it just happened to fade just after Andrea tried to summon her own.

"Hmm, that may be a bit of a problem. Perhaps it is best if you marry her after all."

"MOM! She is not pregnant!"

"That could be arranged."

"I am not so sure about that. But are you sure we are talking about the same thing?"

"I would rather not have random strangers run around knowing that you are a semi-demigod. It could attract unwanted attention. It'd be OK if your wife knew, and her twin brother. Twins share a special bond, he would not betray you as long as she doesn't. Besides, he might join in, I saw him last year on the Christmas Tree Party and he is remarkably androgynous..."

"Mom, your hippie roots are showing."

"You're right dear, but if you can't bind them close to you, it is probably best if you stop using your powers around them."

"How come I have powers in the first place? Am I really the son of an alien wizard?"

"I wouldn't call him an alien. He is human ... only more so. Human the way humans should have been. But yeah, this is obviously something you have from him. I can't do things like that." She snapped her fingers. "*FIAT LUX!*"

"OK, you can't do it. Nobody can, as far as I know, but I still did it once."

"So how did you feel at the moment when you did it?"

"Disoriented."

"No, the moment just before. Did you concentrate hard? Did you furrow your brow? Did you make the constipation face?"

"No, I was just imagining light filling the room, and instead this little globe came up."

"Because I never remember him making the constipation face when he used his powers. He seemed strangely relaxed, as if he *let* it happen instead of *making* it happen."

"I hadn't thought about that. Let me try to recreate it. *FIAT LUX!* Nope. Still nothing."

"Oh well. Your powers are still growing. I am sure you will soon be able to do all kinds of awesome things. You *are* a semi-demigod after all. Just don't show off in front of people you can't trust. And you can't trust a lot of people, really. Me, and your wife and kid, and her twin brother; that's about it."

"She is not my wife! We don't have kids!"

"Well, as I said, that would probably not be very hard to arrange. My guess would be that if demigod wizardry meets one or two layers of contraception, the contraception is going to lose. Your dad could move through walls without even slowing down, so we must assume your sperm may also be able to do that."

"What the ever loving ..."

"Of course, we did not really test that. Have you ever noticed your sperm appearing in places it was not supposed to?"

"MOM!"

"Well, I think Grandma should be safe anyway."

"I don't love my enemies that way!"

"Besides, she's like 60."

"That's entirely beside the point here! I assure you no sperm, no matter how insane, would approach her for any reason whatsoever."

Tormod snapped his fingers. "FIAT LUX!" He was in his room, sitting by the desk, making his best non-constipation face. But nothing happened. Normally when you learn a new skill, it gets easier with practice. But the only time he had gotten this to work was before he ever practiced it the first time. Did this work opposite of all other skills? Or was there some other reason why it worked that time and not now? Could it possibly be that one or both of the twins had caused it? He felt like he was the one, like an energy flowed through him and out from him. But perhaps they were also a necessary part of it. His mother had not seemed to think so, though. She seemed to totally believe that he was the son of some extra-dimensional super-wizard and would be able to do impossible things before breakfast really soon now.

Then again, she also thought he might have babies with Andrea really soon now.

Speaking of the sun. Well, one of the suns. "Tormod? Are you decent?"

"Yes Mom! Come on in! Just don't step on the batteries."

"Good morning dear. I was thinking to ask you for a tiny favor."

"I already put all my laundry in the hamper. Look at the floor."

"Nice batteries. In my childhood, we had to play with wind-up cars. And dolls."

"Would you be OK with me playing with dolls?"

"Of course, dear. I am sure you will be able to get me grandchildren one way or another, and I would actually prefer you take a very long time doing so."

"I assume the tiny little favor is not about grandchildren, then."

"Not at all. But now that your powers have finally begun to manifest, well, I kinda woke up with a super stiff neck this morning and it hurts."

"I am really sorry to hear that."

"So I thought perhaps you wanted to heal me."

"Mom, I don't know how to heal."

"Well, it can't be harder than making a ball of light. I hear even some humans can do it."

"I can't make a ball of light anymore either. FIAT LUX!"

"Well, healing should be easier. Let me have the chair, it is easier if I sit and you stand."

"Sure thing. So, how am I supposed to do this?"

"Put your hand on my neck and want to heal me, I guess?"

"You guess?"

"Well, you could yell some magic catchphrase but it does not seem to help much, does it? Your dad never used magic phrases."

"OK, here goes."

"Well, you have kind of nice warm hands, but I don't think there was any magic there."

"I think I would have noticed too."

"Perhaps try again?"

"Totally. Nope, nothing. Did you know that when I try something twice in a row, I get a little tired? Then when I try it a third time, I continue getting tired."

"I never knew that. Your dad never needed to try anything. He just did it."

"Well excuse me for not being my dad!"

"It is OK. You will be a dad soon enough if you keep hanging out with barely legal teens like that."

"I thought we agreed to not have that conversation all the time?"

"Have we even had that conversation? About the birds and the bees?"

"You shoved a book at me, I believe it was called *Human Mating Behavior* by the guy who wrote *The Naked Ape*."

"Nah, that was not it. I gave you a picture book by him. I think the one you are talking about was *Strategies of Human Mating*, or possibly *The Mating Mind*. Pretty sure it was not *Sperm Wars*. You would have remembered that. It is highly controversial and modern research has largely depreciated..."

"Sperm wars aside, could we not talk about the birds and the bees while I am touching you? It is kind of weird you know."

"Try one more time to heal my neck. You need the practice, obviously."

"Trying. Sorry, I am just not the healing type."

"Your dad was totally the healing type. I guess I will just have to wait another year. You are just living slowly, that is all."

"Sometimes I am glad I am living at all!"

"Me too, baby. Me too."

"This was the last test before Christmas exams. We are in December now, so it is time to take a little time repeating topics we have learned so far this year, and make sure you have it all in box for the tests. We teachers will be scored on these tests, you know, so you better do your best or you might get an angry old hag next year."

"We'll be in high school next year, Mrs Sande."

"Oh, that's right. Well, do your best anyway, for the sake of your little brothers and sisters, so they can have a young and friendly teacher as well. Anyway, the dark horse this time was Tormod, with a surprise score of 80! That is really good, for you. Of course our three regular regulars still beat over 90, but still, that's a lot of progress since spring. So you see, a good attendance matters! We don't just keep you here for fun, you really do learn something here."

"Yes, teacher."

It really was easier. There was no denying it. Perhaps it was him growing up and catching up with the rest, as his mother had predicted. Or perhaps it was his mysteriously improved health, as Mrs Sande thought. What was that about anyway? He could not heal his mother, but was it possible that he had somehow healed himself? Or was that too just a part of growing up?

Speaking of growing boys, it was Tormod's opinion that if Mrs Sande truly wanted all of her students to get the best possible grades, she might benefit from not occasionally dressing in a way that showed off her female form to the best advantage. And there was a lot of advantage there; no wonder she was married! Who wouldn't want to marry someone who was both smart and looking like that? But that kind of thinking during class probably did nothing good for your grades. It might well help attendance, though. He could imagine that.

In mid December, snow fell and stayed on the ground. None of Magic Users Club members had spells to remove footsteps from snow, so they could not go to the Secret Hideout, or it would not be secret anymore. Besides, the last time had been so biting cold, they could not stay long, since they were shivering even with thick winter clothes. There was no electricity, and the whole place was way too small to make a large enough fire. Besides, it was all made of tinder. Even the candle made Tormod uneasy and he made sure it was absolutely dead before leaving the cabin.

Now with their hideout unavailable, they faced the difficult choice between meeting in a less secure spot, or delay their progress in the Arcane Arts. So they ended up scheduling the next Thursday meeting in the witch's room. And that was how Tormod ended up ringing the doorbell at the Berg residence, dressed all in black, on an otherwise unremarkable evening.

Andrea's room was surprisingly neat, apart from the fairly large collection of witchy paraphernalia, and the walls being mostly covered with dark posters with witchy themes. These disappeared from view instantly as Andrea closed the door behind them and turned off the light, without having lighted the black candle.

'*FIAT LUX!*' Tormod whispered, but of course nothing happened. Hopefully no one had heard anything. Andrea, who after all lived here, easily found her way to the table and lit the candle. Not the one at the shed, obviously, but another equally black.

So, the presence of his would-be magic using friends was not the thing that had made his light spell happened. IF it had happened at all. Had he really, literally, physically created a ball of light? Or did he just remember it because he wanted to, because it would be cool, because it was the kind of thing that was supposed to happen? He was not sure anymore. It was like something out of a dream now. Sometimes he had dreamed he could fly, and when he was a boy, he had been absolutely sure he remembered flying. But he did not. Now that he thought back on it, he knew it was just a dream.

Tormod listened sympathetically as Andreas recounted in detail how he had used a spell to locate a mislaid object. It was not even someone else who had put it away - he had simply forgotten where he put it. After performing the elaborate ritual, based on information found on the Interweb and adapted using the rules learned from the Arch-Wizard, the location of the object suddenly became clear to him. Magically. He was definitely making progress.

Perhaps that was the way it was. *We convinced ourselves that the magic was real.* Because the people that mattered most to him believed in people like that. His two only friends, for as long as that lasted. And his mother: "What color was the ball of light?" "Could you heal my neck please?" Because he lived around people like that, he had lost the ability to tell fantasy from reality. He sighed and looked at his hand, recalling the ball of light that he once was so sure he had seen hovering above it. *FIAT LUX!*

And then he felt it again. The wrenching, disorienting feeling was briefer, less intense this time. The tingling sensation perhaps a little stronger than he remembered it. The ball of light a little brighter? He was not sure. He had almost forgotten the last time, all the details. It had become just a story he remembered telling himself.

And yet, here it was again. He had not even said the words out loud. He stood up and hung the small globe of light in the ceiling. The twins just stared.

"Ah, uh, it seems I no longer need to actually speak the words out loud to create these. Let us all keep practicing and growing stronger, OK?"

"Yes, Arch-Wizard!"

And then, suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

Chapter 4: Healer, heal thyself

Well, that was embarrassing. When there was a knock on the door, Andrea immediately answered: "We are performing a super secret ritual and can't be interrupted."

"Andrea!" Tormod whispered "You have a boy in your room, it is only natural that your mom would check on you."

"My brother is also here, so that is not a problem."

"That's what I tried to tell my mom too. It did not work."

Actually, when he told her that they were going to have their club meeting in Andrea's room, his mom had implored him not to make her pregnant, as she was not really ready to raise grandchildren yet. He had pointed out that her brother would also be there. "Hmm, I don't know if you can impregnate males" she had mused, "but it is probably best not to try just in case." That was just the kind of mother he had. The question was not whether she was normal, just how abnormal she really was.

"But what if she sees the light?" Andrea wondered out loud.

"I'll try to get rid of it." He pointed at the ball of light. "Banishment, this world!" It winked out, just like that.

"Wow. Don't ever banish me!"

"No chance of that. Besides, I did not bring you into this world. I may be older than you, but not by that much."

The twins' mother had brought cookies. That might well have been just an excuse for checking on them, as the teenagers were almost certainly able to find cookies and more on their own. She seemed cheerful enough, but then she did find them all fully dressed and not holding sharp objects.

"So, what's the thing about seeing the light?" she asked seemingly innocently.

Andrea opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again, but nothing came out. Time to step in.

"Didn't you know? She's the Dark Witch of Darkness. Of course she does not want people to see the Light."

"Oh, yes. She has been going on for a while about that."

"The light burns us!" said Andrea belatedly. "Please close the door so we can eat the cookies in the dark."

"We should eat them secretly" said Tormod with a straight face. "Cookies taste best when eaten in secret."

"Finally I can say this!" said Andreas with an expression of unrestrained excitement. "COME TO THE DARK SIDE! WE HAVE COOKIES!"

Their mother actually shook his hand when he left and thanked him for coming over. Perhaps they also did not have many friends?

And then it was Christmas. It was not a big deal. It never was. As far as Grandma was concerned, Christmas was all about her. Tormod had the more reasonable expectation that Christmas was supposed to be a child-friendly event. So in a compromise, they barely even celebrated Christmas at all. Or Yule as it was still called in Norway. There certainly wasn't much Christianity in the common celebration, except that a goodly number of Norwegians briefly visited the church on Christmas Eve. The number was dwindling, though. And the Øygard family was definitely not among the churchgoers.

Tormod's mother baked a number of Christmas cookies, which he still enjoyed, although not with the intensity of his younger years. On Christmas Eve she made a special Christmas dinner. She ate with her mother first, and later with Tormod, so they did not have to share a table. When he was a kid, it used to be the other way around, but otherwise very little was changed.

Somehow Tormod was much more aware of these things now than he had ever been before. It was as if the doors of perception had been thrown recklessly open, and he could see a lot of things that had flown over his head in the past. He could see connections between things that had seemed random before. And he could see nuances in people's facial expression and other body language, and hear their tone of voice more clearly. So was this how adults saw the world? If so, he had been a child up until this fall. He suspected this was exactly how it was.

"Mom," he said, "for the future you don't need to celebrate Christmas for my sake. I am an adult now. I don't need presents and special days."

His mother shook her head. "If you think you are an adult, you are not yet an adult" she said with a sad smile. "But it does not matter if you are. It is not just for you, it is for me too. Even when you have long white beard, if I am still alive, you will always be my baby."

Tormod sat in his room, watching his hand, recalling the feeling he had over at the twins' place when he made that second ball of light. It had taken a long time before he had been able to do it that time, weeks after he first did it almost by accident. Now, as he tried to do it again, he felt like he could remember how he did it. But when he tried, it did not work. Those other feelings did not follow. It was like grasping at something just out of reach.

How long was he going to stay like this? His mother seemed so sure that he would inherit all his father's powers, including probably some she did not even know about, since he had no occasion to show them off. What did she say, his father could pass through walls, and that was why he could not have sex until he wanted babies? Not that there was anyone who would volunteer to have sex with him, so not a big deal, but it would probably become a big deal sooner or later. But what if he could never pass through walls? Then that particular problem would never come up.

He stood up and walked toward the closed door, hands stretched out in front of him. His palms hit the door. They did not pass through. The door was every bit as solid as he remembered it. There was no way he could walk through it, much less a wall.

What else? He was supposed to be able to heal people, but there was nothing to heal

at the moment, so he could not test that. He had failed completely back when he tried, though.

She had mentioned that his father could make himself invisible or look like a different person. But he could not even make a birthmark become invisible. He had one on his arm that was easy to recognize. No matter how much he concentrated, with or without his constipation face, it was still there. He felt like it should be possible: Unlike the walk through solid objects experiment, he felt like some part of him was reaching out, but nothing happened. Oh well. Perhaps he really was going to grow into at least one or two of those powers eventually. It had only been half a school year. He still had time.

Even if he could not do anything supernatural, at least he had grown in other ways. Most notably his brain. Perhaps he should read through his school books from last year and see if he understood them better now. He had understood them well enough to secure a decent grade, but a lot had disappeared during the summer vacation. Understanding the basics would probably help him when he came back to school again after the Christmas break.

Rune was looking entirely too smug. This could be nothing but bad news.

"Ohay there Dumbledore! Your magic wand getting any action lately?"

It was probably impossible to avoid in the long run, despite all talk about secrecy. When you have to talk, you have to talk. It is that or bursting. Girls have it that way with talking, boys with farting. At some point there just is no helping it. At least a fart doesn't spread as wide as a word.

"I think you may have mistaken me for some other white-bearded gentleman" Tormod said. He felt stiff and uncomfortable. They were definitely looking for trouble. But what else was new?

"I hear you're telling some girl in second year that you're some kind of archmage or something."

"Her brother is also in the same club. It's called role playing. Look it up. It is quite popular with young adults."

"I think it is called trying to impress a girl by telling stupid lies."

"Well, that would be because you don't know what role playing is. As I said, look it up."

"So, what kind of magic can you do? Do you get to wave your magic wand?"

"We don't use wands. She roleplays a witch, her brother a summoner, and I an alien wizard."

"Yeah, we know all about that. Your dad, the alien wizard god and all that."

"Well, yeah. That kind of stuff."

"So, can you heal?"

"Supposedly. Luckily there isn't much opportunity to practice."

"I can fix that." Suddenly, Rune spun and kicked his shin with all his might. It hurt so bad, he was seeing specks. He had to sit down.

"Now, you can practice healing on yourself. It doesn't get more practical than that." The boy laughed, and the two followers that trailed along with him laughed too, even if

they started just a little later.

"You know, you're 16 now. You're not a kid anymore."

"Unlike you."

"You are old enough that violent assault could have consequences for your future."

"Sure, if anyone saw something like that happen. You guys seen any violent assault around here?"

"Nope."

"Nothing."

"So, there you go. Have fun healing yourself."

"Thank you, I may do that. Have fun practicing your mad criminal skillz. Perhaps I'll visit you in prison one day. Just to enjoy the sight, I mean."

"Sure. Tell yourself that."

Heal himself, huh? He had not even been able to heal his mother's aching neck. Luckily it faded with time. But if it really was possible to practice healing ... If he even had a spark of it ...

He pulled up his pants leg and laid his hand on the spot. It hurt bad, but he knew there was nothing broken. It was going to be yellow and blue though, at the very least. OK, imagine the pain fading. Reach out, like when those other things happen, reach out into the unknown...

A moment of disorientation. A movement of energy, like an electric tingle. A warmth spreading from his hand into his flesh, washing away the pain and harm, like clay dissolving in a stream.

Tormod stood up, gingerly. He felt fine. Perhaps he could feel a little discomfort, or perhaps it was just a lingering memory. He took a few steps. He was walking normally. The pain felt like a dream now, already half forgotten. Was he just hypnotizing himself? Would the pain return? Would his leg turn black and blue? It did not feel like that at all. It felt like he had somehow, magically, healed himself. So that was how you did it? Would he be able to heal others now? Or was this too a "once in a month magic" like the glowing orbs? He could not say. As far as he was concerned, there was no hurry to ask Rune for help to test it one more time. Although the thought did occur to him, briefly.

"Something most peculiar happened at school the other day" said Tormod. The snow was still covering the ground, and it was still painfully cold outside, so their next Secret Club Meeting was also in Andrea's room. The twins were looking at him expectantly.

"Evidently they had heard rumors that I was still practicing the Arcane Arts. That's strange, it's been quite a while since I've mentioned it. But it seemed like they had heard it from someone else. So anyway, one of the guys decided to test whether I could heal myself, so he kicked me with all his might. It hurt rather a bit. I may be a natural born wizard of sorts, but unfortunately I am not invulnerable."

"I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry! It just kind of slipped out!" Andrea hit her forehead against the table. "I did not mean to! I had no idea this would happen!"

"I know. It just goes to show how important secrecy can be. I am hardly in a position

to complain, since I myself announced my position to the world in the fall the year before last. But I am me. It would be more problematic if one of you were attacked. I think you should try to lie low when it comes to this. Our kind is always subject to persecution from the muggles."

"I'm so terribly sorry!"

"Don't worry. I simply healed myself on the spot and walked away as soon as he was out of sight. No need to give away more of my secrets than necessary."

"You... You healed yourself?"

"It would seem I can occasionally do that, when the damage is minor. I am not going to harm myself on purpose though, to get more practice. I am still mortal, and I would rather not tempt anyone else into testing the limits of my healing, either."

"No, of course not. But wow. You can heal yourself, can you heal others too?"

"Perhaps. I tried once but failed. But my powers seem to be growing. Perhaps in the future I may be able to do so easily. My father had the power to heal, among many other things. So I suspected I might have at least some ability."

"This is so awesome!"

"Please do not tell anyone about it. If the world finds out that I can heal even a little, we will be beset by people seeking remedy for all their ills, preferably for free. Even if I were a full-fledged demigod, there is no way I could keep up with all the suffering in this world. And as it is, I don't even know whether I will be able to heal myself again for some time."

"Mom, I guess I should have told you first, but some days ago one of the boys at school kicked me in the leg, really hard. Pretty much with all his strength, I think. It did not break any bones, but I think it may have broken a blood vessel or two."

"At your age, that is criminal behavior. But I assume you just healed yourself once he was out of sight."

"How did you know?"

"Well, you haven't appeared to be in pain or walk with a limp or anything like that. I doubt the school nurse would be able to patch you up that quickly if it was as bad as you say."

"You really are smart!"

"You only realized now?"

"Well, I had my suspicions, but you know, up until recently I was too dumb to tell whether people were smart or just less dumb than me."

"Haha, yes, that is true. I am glad you grew out of that. You are a lot more perceptive and eloquent these days. It is refreshing to converse with your new, upgraded self."

"There's that, I guess. But I am a bit worried. How could I heal myself but not you?"

"Perhaps your power has grown. Or perhaps you just had bad luck the first time."

"Or perhaps I just had good luck this time."

"Perhaps. I am glad you had, though."

"Or perhaps I can only heal myself."

"I doubt that. Your dad could definitely heal me."

"Tell me if you hurt anywhere again, and I will try again."

"I will tell you next time I have my period."

"Mom! That would be awkward like ... like terribly awkward."

"I am pretty sure you don't need to touch the actual afflicted area. Your dad at least could touch anywhere and cure anything anywhere. So I suspect the same applies to you. If not, we've learned one more thing."

As far as Tormod was concerned, it was awkward to think that his mother even *had* periods, but then his mother was the queen of awkward, so what did he expect?

"Guess what? It seems our class now has **four** geniuses, at least in math! Tormod, your results on this test are super good, enough for a shared third place. If you continue like this, you could graduate from junior high school with a top grade in math, how about that? And for the rest of you, this shows that hard work really does pay. Tormod has been doing his homework faithfully from the first day, and never been afraid to ask questions if there was something he didn't understand. Now he is one of our top students. Let this be a lesson for us all."

"So how do you like to be teacher's pet?" asked Roger during recess. Like his rival, Roger rarely ventured anywhere these days without a couple "yes-men" or male admirers as Tormod liked to think of them. Roger and Rune were dividing the boys in the class between them, but they also had common enemies, or rather victims, and it seemed Tormod was still at the top of that list.

"I think being well liked by the teachers is a good sign. It shows that I am integrating into adult society. If I have to choose, I would certainly choose that over the opposite."

"We don't like teacher's pets here, do we guys?"

"No we don't."

"No way."

"That's what I'm saying. Those who integrate in adult society cannot also curry favor with groups that are opposed to it. We may like or dislike this, but in modern society, power and rewards are mainly decided by knowledge, connections and conformity. Physical strength and close combat skills are basically worthless, or even seen as a disadvantage."

"We don't like you and your fancy talk. Do we, guys?"

"No we don't."

"Not at all."

"You didn't like me when I was struggling with school either, so that's not it. What does it take for you guys to be happy?"

"When you leave, we will be happy. We don't need your type here."

"Well, that is good news, because we are all going to leave. In a little over 3 years, we'll be spreading like dandruff on the wind. Or daffodils or something. All except Roald, if he chooses to stay on the farm. The rest of us need jobs, and we won't get them without an education. And you won't get much education here. Even next year we have to take the bus to Litlefjord to go to high school. After that we'll be scattered all over the place. You three will soon be living in different cities. But all of you will be wishing you

had done your homework while it was still easy.”

“You think you're so smart, you little shrimp.”

“Nah, it is more like my brain grew up first, and your body grew up first. One day we will both be grown-ups, or so I hope. We may never be friends, but perhaps one day I will let you have a job as janitor at my shiny corporate headquarters.”

“Keep dreaming!”

“Oh, my dreams are bigger than that. Becoming an industry baron is just a side project.”

“Yeah, keep wagging your tail for the teachers and perhaps you will be rich and famous.” Roger barked a laugh, and the other two joined in. And then they just left. For some reason they did not kick or slug him, so all in all it was a good day.

Chapter 5: No smoke without magic

Tormod woke up to pitch black darkness. He rolled over and tried to look at his watch. It glowed in the dark, but with age it glowed for fewer and fewer hours after the lights went out. By now he could not make out the watch hands. If only he could see in the dark!

He felt a brief disorienting movement of energy, similar to when he tried to summon light or heal but failed. And he failed this time too - he still could not see anything more than before - but how come he could even try? Was this something he was supposed to do? He was suddenly very much awake. He was supposed to be able to see in the dark? His mother had never mentioned anything about that, as far as he could remember.

Well, if he only could summon those light balls, he would not *need* to see in the dark. But so far he had never been able to do that unless there were two people nearby who believed in him. Perhaps they enabled him somehow. On the other hand, his mother often said that his powers were going to manifest and grow over time. She had always believed in him, no matter what. She still did. He stilled his mind. *Don't make it happen, let it happen!* He let it happen, and it didn't. As usual. So he reached out and fumbled for the light switch. You'd think he'd know exactly where it was after all this time, but no. He had to fumble for it every time. Every single time! On it came, and the bright light revealed that it was only quarter to six. The middle of the night.

He was a halfblood wizard, there was no doubt about that. He had healed himself once; that just might be psychosomatic, but not really. That kick was not going to fade just by a gentle touch. It was vicious. No, it had to be magic. Anyway, there were the two times he had summoned balls of light, in front of two witnesses. And if he had not been so quick, there might have been three witnesses. So there was no doubt that he had magic. And also, there was... What was it again? Yes, the time when he jumped backward in time, or whatever it was he did. If only he could remember how he did that again...

A sense of vertigo, of moving energy tickling all over his body. The light went out. His hand ... his hand was on the wall, where he had been fumbling for the light switch half a minute ago! He found it, and light flooded the room. He had done it! He had traveled back in time! Only half a minute, but still! If he could do this reliably, it would be the most awesome magickal power in the world. Get shot in the chest? Jump back half a minute and know when to dodge it. Fall into the sea? Jump back half a minute and step away. Said something stupid? Jump back half a minute and say something smart. He had never heard of any wizard with that kind of power, but so much the better: No one would suspect him. He might even be able to touch a girl's butt and jump away to before he had done it, while still remembering how it felt! He had wondered about that quite a bit lately. Hopefully once he knew, he would stop thinking about it every time they bent over.

Practice, practice, practice! He looked at his watch intently. When the seconds pointer

hit half, he would jump again. Ready ... GO!

The sensation was familiar this time, expected. It felt like a movie that was edited, cut at one frame and spliced at another. A discontinuity. The watch showed half a minute earlier: He had been watching it for over half a minute. Awesome! Pure and utter awesome! He had found his secret strength. With this power, he could try anything that took less than half a minute. Well, he should probably not jump out a window or anything until he was absolutely 110% certain that he could do it every time. Speaking of which, there was the half minute mark again. GO!

No. Totally no. The clock just ticked on. It did not really feel close, even. Like grasping at wind. Well, no jumping out windows for a while then. And no touching butts or anything else controversial. Worst of all, no mocking the big bullies. But one day! One day the domain of time itself would be his playground!

"Mom? Could my dad travel in time?"

"I have no idea, baby. If he did, he never took me with him."

That made sense. Tormod had not even taken his watch with him, otherwise it would have continued forward instead of jumping back half a minute. In fact, he realized, he had not physically traveled in time with his body, just sent his mind back in time. And was that even in any real way different from sending it half a minute forward in time and then recalling it?

"So, could he see the future? I need to know."

"Oh yes, definitely! He said to me, and I have repeated this to myself so often in the days after he left, that I know it by heart: 'Your world will need a protector in the tumultuous times to come. I will give you a son, carrying my strength and raised in your love, who will stay with them where I can not.' So he knew you before you were even conceived!"

"You are sure he did not just say that to get into your pants?"

"Baby, I was not wearing any pants by then, so yes, I am sure."

"I did not literally need to know that much."

Time: The final frontier! Nothing was more mysterious. He had recently read in a popular science magazine that time might not even exist, because the equations that best expressed the universe did not contain them; they worked equally well regardless of whether time was flowing forward or backward. One theory was that time was an emergent experience of the human brain, like temperature: What we experience as heat is actually the movement of the molecules as they vibrate faster when more energy is added. This increased micro-vibration is registered by the body's sensors as heat. Time might be a more complex version of the same thing: The innumerable micro-experiences of entropy would add up to our concept of time. The idea that time is a mental construct was strengthened by the fact that it did not manifest clearly in humans from the start, like the 3-dimensional world we take in through our senses. Rather, it takes several years before a child starts having a normal concept of time. Of course, in his case, after some more years, he now had an abnormal concept of time; but that was different.

If time was the fourth dimension, and this dimension was available only through the effort of the mind, not through direct sense input, then it logically followed that there might be more dimensions. A fifth, certainly, because without it we would not be able to see time from outside and even mentally "travel" into the past through memory. Perhaps the higher dimensions that only the mind could access was where wizardry came from? That would explain why, in role-playing games, intelligence was the trait usually associated with mage classes: The more mind-power you had, the deeper you could delve into the higher dimensions, and bring them to bear on the 3-dimensional world. Except even with his rapidly improving intellect, he seemed to have a very woolly, intuitive grasp on wizardry. Sometimes it worked when he did not expect it to; mostly it did not work when he wanted it to. He needed to strengthen his mind, if only he knew how!

It was still February, the coldest month of the year. The black-clad Guardians of the Secrets of Magic had therefore once again gathered in the hallowed halls of the Dark Witch of Darkness, Andrea Montana Maxima, for their weekly consultations. Entering the room, the gaze of Arch-Wizard Thormodus Magnus fell once again on the pitch black candle meticulously placed at the center of the table, and also at the center of the precisely drawn rune circle inscribed on blood-red-colored cardboard with black waterproof marker. It was habitual for the Dark Witch of Darkness herself to light the candle with a poorly disguised lighter, pretending that it was set alight by the power of magic. But what if ...?

The feeling of unmooring, of briefly moving one step to the side of the physical world, into a place of tingling prickling energy currents. And it did not grasp futilely at the air as it usually did. He could not see anything, but he could feel that something was happening. The tiniest trickle of that arcane energy was moving out from him, coming from a place at right angles with every direction in the known four dimensions, and streaming somehow toward the candle wicker. He could not see anything happening, but he could feel it, almost but not quite like a physical sense.

"Stand back, don't go near the candle" he hissed. He still could not see anything. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the twins staring at him, but he did not take his eyes from the candle, did not dare to even blink. Whatever it was, it was still running. And then a thin blue line of smoke began to rise. Now the twins were also looking at the candle, in time to see it burst into flame. He let go of whatever he had been holding on to, and took a deep breath, and then another.

To be honest, it would have been faster and easier to use the lighter. But given the ecstatic reaction of the twins, you would think he had walked on water.

He did have a feeling, off and on for the duration of the meeting, that maybe he had done something he was going to regret. He had not even really wanted to boast or preen: He had been genuinely curious as to whether he could set a candle on fire with his mind. Now he had the answer, but at the cost of having given away a secret that might one day be a matter of life or death. If nothing else, then because if he became

widely known to have psychic powers, the world's secret services would be after him to test him, possibly dissect him, possibly clone him, possibly all of these and more.

Then again, he told himself, there are all kinds of would-be miracle workers in the world. Most rational people dismiss them as con artists or attention seekers. Hopefully the same would happen to him. In fact, he might have to take steps to make sure of it.

Now that Tormod was this old, and also had friends for the first time, his mother bought him a phone. The Berg twins had iPhones, but his mother stated quite clearly that she was "not paying double price for a brand name", and so he got a Huangdong phone running a competing system. There was, he read, some animosity between Apfel, which made the iPhones and various other shiny hi-tec, and the search giant Gogool which supplied the Algol operating system for most of the other smartphone makers. Perhaps in an alternate world, they could have been friends, but here there was a rather intense rivalry between them. Tormod was a bit worried that this might influence his friendship, such as it was, with the twins. Luckily they were not technically inclined, certainly less so than his mother, and were generally happy to be able to reach him without relying on telepathy.

These gadgets had been around for some years now and were becoming quite powerful. His mother described them as "pocket computers", as indeed they were called by the third major supplier, which had been the first to make such things a commodity, even though most people had now forgotten this in favor of the new stars. Back in the day, the things were called "PCom", for "Personal / Pocket Computer / Communicator", and the name was still around. Most people just called them smartphones though. But they were far more than phones. You could search the Interweb, read and send email, play music and many other things. It was like wizardry; he should know.

And this was why, on Saturday when he was not at school, Tormod placed the smartphone on his table with the address of a major news site already keyed in. Things were sure to have happened during the night that he could not possibly guess. A piece of paper was lying on the table beside the phone. He would press the button, read the first headline, jump back in time to before he pressed the button, then write down the headline. Only then would he press the button again. If it was a real psychic power, the headline he had written down would be in the news, and there was no way he could have guessed it. (Unless the headline was "Politicians disagree", perhaps.) Obviously if the headline on the paper was NOT in the actual news afterwards, then he was delusional and his time travel / psychic foresight did not actually exist. Science!!

He pressed the button. In a few seconds, the news front page came up. "Ferry disaster in Asia" read the first headline. Exactly how this was news, he was not sure. There were like a couple billion people in Asia and numerous islands, something was bound to happen with alarming regularity. If it wasn't a ferry, it might have been a plane. But that was not his concern right now. He closed his eyes, unfurrowed his brows, and *let the magic happen*. The familiar sense of sidestepping reality, of entering a tingling mist of esoteric energy, and he opened his eyes looking at a smartphone still waiting for him to press the key. He had made it again! So far this seemed to be his most reliable

spell, or superpower or whatever it was. That did not say much: He was still lucky if it worked every other time, and he could not do it twice in a row without taking a long break in between. But it had worked now. *Ferry disaster in Asia* he wrote on the paper, then pressed the key on his smartphone again. The page loaded. "EU denounces Pakistani putsch" read the first headline.

He got a bit of a cold sweat there for a moment, until he scrolled down and saw the ferry disaster as headline number two. Evidently the new story had come in while he was writing down the headline and trying to memorize the exact state of his brain while time traveling. So, it was real. He could prove it. Now, more importantly, he needed to find a way to "disprove" it: To practice it without getting noticed. But then that applied to all his wizardry, really.

"Good job in P.E today, Tormod" said the teacher. "It's clear that you have been training. You've made a lot of progress this school year."

"Thanks, but it is not that I've worked very hard. My mother says I am growing more slowly than other boys, so I guess I am mostly just catching up."

"Your mother is probably right. I notice that you still have a problem with fine motor control ... basically, you lack precision especially when doing complex series of movements. Hopefully you grow out of that before you start driving a car. But your running speed, strength and stamina have improved a lot since last year. I would rate you around average now, and that's a first. Keep practicing! Having a smart brain is great, but not if you're dead; a healthy lifestyle is a foundation you can build on your whole life."

It was true, he was getting stronger and faster, and especially his stamina seemed to have improved. It was quite noticeable since it had all happened in one school year, and they were still in March. But it was not something he really noticed much outside of P.E, and not much there either when playing ball games, which they did three times out of four. It was not nearly as dramatic a change as his intelligence. He used to be ... not challenged, exactly, but on the low side of normal. He could keep up and get pretty good grades as long as he did his homework and read his texts twice, and his mother made sure he studied hard. But tests at school had been a problem, because he tended to run out of time. That was the biggest difference when it came to school. School was a stressing place, and having too little time made him even more stressed, so he tended to do badly on tests. But not anymore. He was pretty close to genius level now. Not a remarkable genius, of course, the kind who grow up to invent things and get Nobel prizes. Perhaps later. But the kind of local genius that aced tests in all the classes.

That was not the only part of his increased intelligence, though. He was noticing so many things that he had not noticed before. He was seeing so many connections. He was thinking more clearly. He understood other people better. He understood books better, even novels. It was as if the colors were more colorful, the water wetter, reality more real. There was so much more detail, so much more context. Had he even used a word like "context" when thinking to himself before? He was starting to think like an adult. Well, except for the butts probably.

There were still butts everywhere. And breasts, but those were guarded by eyes. He sincerely hoped this was not how adult men spent their lives. Hopefully once he got over his curiosity, things would go back to normal and girls would be just people. There was nothing demigodlike about noticing them this way. Sometimes they looked normal and he did not think anything more about them, but then suddenly a body part would move in a way his body could not, and he'd lose track of his thoughts and become kind of confused for a moment, as if standing beside himself, kind of like magic. That better not be something he'd have to live with for the next hundred years.

"Mom, could my dad set things on fire just by looking at them?"

"Oh no! What happened? Was anyone hurt?"

"No, no. I just lighted a candle. Lit a candle, I mean."

"I really don't think the difference between lighted and lit is nearly as important as the difference between a candle and a person. Even so, how many people were looking?"

"Only the twins. And I only did it once."

"That's good. Perhaps over time they will think they imagined it."

"That was what I thought."

"If not, we have to pretend it was a trick. Like you used an illegal laser pointer or something."

"Where do I get an illegal laser pointer?"

"I confiscated it and destroyed the evidence."

"You're an awesome mom. As long as you don't confiscate my stuff for real."

"If you set people on fire, I will confiscate you and lock you in the closet."

"Speaking of which, when am I supposed to pass through walls? I still can't do it."

"I am sure you will notice. Don't try it while there are other people around, OK? Not even the twins."

"Of course not."

"You'd think it was of course to not set thing on fire too. But then you are just barely 16."

"I've learned my lesson now! So what other superpowers can I expect?"

"Have I mentioned flying? I am not sure if I've mentioned flying."

"How do I do that?"

"How do you do anything? Same way you set candles on fire, I guess. Or make balls of light. Or heal yourself."

"So I just will it and then get out of the way?"

"I guess so. All I know is your dad seemed very relaxed about it, like he was just walking or talking or doing something completely normal."

"OK. Up, up and aw...ouch."

"Don't break the floor now."

"Guess I can't fly yet."

"Perhaps you could practice making yourself just a little lighter. It's not like you

learned to walk in one day either."

OK, it is dark again. Something about seeing in the dark. Right, I am supposed to be able to do that or something. I haven't tried since back then, since I haven't really needed it. Let's see...

There was the familiar shifting sensation, the electrified ticklish feeling, and then ... Well, he could see in the dark, kind of. He could see his own body, and everything up to 2-3 centimeters from his body, as if he was surrounded by a tight aura of light. It was kind of creepy actually. It was also not very useful, although at least he could see his watch.

Shifting his focus slightly, he could see through his pajamas and see his own skin. Unfortunately, he was not really the person he most wanted to see naked. Then again, none of the people he wanted to see naked were anywhere near the house, so no surprise there. He shifted his focus again, and he could look through the skin, see veins and muscles and the bones of his hand. Seriously icky! It might be useful if he ever had to self-diagnose some condition. But he better do so in the bathroom where he could puke. He hurried to turn the ability off, and darkness resumed. But the images continued to haunt his inner eye. So he tried to create a floating light again.

That was better. The tingling gathered in his fingers and a ball of light hovered. It was not as bright as a light bulb and barely even a candle, but it lit up the room somewhat. And it was kind of pretty, floating in the air like that. It was definitely prettier than looking at his own veins and sinews, let alone the stuff in his chest!

So, he had x-ray vision now, but only for himself. Well, better than nothing. Kind of. Also, the visible aura around him, whatever that was. He had actually been able to see his watch quite clearly. He might be able to read a book in pitch black night by holding his hand behind it, if it was not too thick. Or just trace along the lines with a finger, like a kid learning to read. Again, minimally useful. But then every of his "wizard" powers were tiny like that. A faint ball of floating light. Being able to heal a kick in the shin ... OK, that was genuinely useful, because those things *hurt*, but if it was like the rest of his "superpowers", it probably couldn't heal anything serious. He had failed to heal his mother's neck pain, and more recently her stomach flu. On the bright side, he had not gotten the stomach flu himself. Perhaps he would never be able to heal anyone else but himself. Perhaps he would always and ever only be able to perform small tricks. He was, after all, not his father.

Chapter 6: Liar, liar, pants on fire!

Tormod was on his way home from school, lost in thought, when suddenly Rune and three of his friends stepped out in front of him. Four boys, all stronger or at least better at fighting than he. This was not going to be a friendly chat. Wait, he could travel in time, right?

A moment of tingling confusion, as if stepping into mist, and a sense of sudden change, as if a movie scene being cut and spliced. He was further down the road. Ahead of him was the corner where the four boys were waiting for him. He stopped, turned around, and ran. This was the obvious way home, the one he always took. But there was another road, less than half a kilometer longer. It was definitely going to take him less time than a "chat" with that gang.

Rune would not have brought out the big guns unless he planned some criminal-level violence. The guy was increasingly out of control; he had grown worse since this school year began, and begun to skip classes since winter break. It seemed like he had made his decision now, to go for a criminal career and build his own little gang. It seemed like the most idiotic idea ever, since crime doesn't really pay well compared to the risk. But then with his recent school performance, Rune would be hard pressed to find anything that paid well. He was already almost 17; it was a bit late now to learn the basics and become a good student. And the factory jobs like his father used to have, those were gone. And so was his father. Tormod did not know the details, but the guy had needed to go elsewhere for work, and evidently he had found some woman in that place and never came back.

"Everyone do what they think is best," Tormod's mother used to say. It was just that a lot of people were really stupid or had crazy ideas about how life worked. Rune was clearly one of those. Heiedal was not really an urban enough place to support a criminal gang: The point of being a successful criminal is to not get caught, and when you and your little posse are the only rebels around, it is not particularly hard to guess who is breaking windows or spraying paint on buildings. So far it seemed Rune's mother had managed to smooth over things, but he would be in trouble soon enough. Beating up Tormod probably seemed like one of the safer things to do, and the worst part was that he was probably right. In a small place like this, the threshold was pretty high for contacting the police, and he did not have anyone else to scare them with. Without a conscience and with no real fear of revenge, there was no guessing how far the guy would go now. And Tormod might not be able to time-jump every single time he ran into trouble, much as he would like to. None of his spells were that reliable.

On the bright side, he was now an average runner with better than average stamina. Perhaps that would be his plan B from now on and until his classmate got taken away to an institution.

"I see you've improved your coordination, like we talked about last month. That's impressive, you're an amazing fast learner."

"Thanks. But honestly, I think strength might be more useful."

"You think so, huh? I'd like to see you in the teacher's office after you've showered."

Uh-oh. That came out of the blue.

With hair still half-wet, Tormod knocked on the door. He had briefly considered trying to heat it with his heat spell, but he was not entirely sure of the strength or his control. He had suffered plenty of jokes about his hair being on fire; he would rather not experience it literally.

"Ah, there you are" said the P.E teacher. "Let's take a walk." The man took him to a small office which was probably used by teachers for some unknown purpose; there were a lot of binders, among other things. "Look, Tormod, I have been watching you since I started here two years ago. But it is only now that I think it is realistic. Besides, you are over 16 now, so there is no need for your mother to get involved. And I won't be your teacher much longer."

Is he gay? Is he hitting on me? That would be a first.

"Uh, I am not sure I understand what you are talking about."

"Self-defense. I want to train you. Those kids are getting more and more out of control, especially Rune. This is not just kids smacking each other any longer. This is getting dangerous. I want to teach you how to survive with as little damage as possible, while doing as little damage as possible. The way you've been growing, and with what you said at the end of class today, I'm worried that you could do something desperate, and things would get out of hand. I want to teach you basics of martial arts. How to control your body and focus your mind, how to protect yourself and others. This is not about picking fights; fleeing is often the best option, but sometimes that is not possible. High school is not going to be any easier than here, except that you are going to get stronger. I want that strength to be tempered by skill and knowledge."

"You'd do that? For me?"

"Yes. And for free, in case you wondered."

"Better late than never! When can I begin?"

"Let's start with the basics" said Mr Hartmann, the P.E teacher. "And the basic is breathing."

"I do that. That's what I hope to continue doing."

"Smart kid. But there are many ways to breathe, and knowing the right ways in each situation is often the difference between victory and loss in a fight. It can even be the difference between having a fight or not having a fight. When people begin to feel afraid, their breathing changes. Without control of the breathing, this scared breathing can further increase their fear, leading to a spiral of panic. This could be useful for running away, but surprisingly often staying calm can avoid a confrontation. When you face a possible attacker and they see you are afraid, they may press their advantage, thinking you are an easy mark. If you then panic and strike out, they may overreact and

things could escalate very quickly, leading to injuries or even death. But if you face them with unshakable calm, they will be the first to get nervous, before they have really initiated hostilities. They may back off if you give them an opening, but even if not, you start with a psychological high ground."

"I see! I had never thought of it that way."

"The greatest victory is to overcome your enemy without violence, as Sun Tzu said. I think it was Sun Tzu. Anyway, it is true. If we can avoid fighting, this is always the best option. If we must fight, we should do so with a clear head. Proper breathing is essential in both cases. Now just stand there and try to breathe deeply yet slowly, through your nose, into the stomach. Like that. RAAARGH!"

Tormod jumped at the angry roar.

"See? Notice how your breath changed."

"Not just my breath! I almost peed myself. Do you have any idea how scary you looked?"

"For now, concentrate on your breath. We'll get into your heart rhythm much later. Observe your breath."

The training took place in Mr Hartmann's home, and somewhat to Tormod's relief the man had a wife and two severely underage children. And the rest of the session went on in the same style: Teaching breathing, posture, mindfulness and calm. At the end, Hartmann even lent him a book about meditation. "Concentration without effort, this is the essence of meditation. In every advanced culture, meditation is known either from religion or martial arts or both. Even if you never get in trouble ever again in your life, practicing meditation will make you happy, healthy and wise and grant you a long life, unless something extraordinary like a war or great accident cuts you down in your prime. But at least you will have lived a better life."

That did not sound like anything even vaguely related to self-defense, but it might still be useful. Tormod thanked the man profusely and carried the book very carefully with him home for further study.

Tormod started practicing meditation 20 minutes each day, plus 10 minutes of Chinese stretching exercises that were supposed to build his inner energy. He did this every day of the week, including during Easter break. The first thing he noticed was that it was impossible to stop thinking, or to control the mind to a very high degree. If he tried to focus on his breathing, and only his breathing, a jumble of thoughts would come bubbling up like in a cooking pan about to boil. The book had told him that this was going to happen, but he had not really understood it until he tried. It was like his mind was a classroom full of first-graders, babbling and squabbling and running around the moment you turned your back on them. The book told him to not fight it, but passively accept it. What he observed was his mind, but he was not his mind. Exactly what he was he was not sure yet, the book just called it the Self. But the fact that he could observe his mind as if from outside showed that whatever it was, it was not the mind.

Of course, staying outside the squabbling mind was the hard part. Before he knew it, he was deep into a daydream or a memory or a plan or a feeling, and then he woke up

and realized that he was no longer observing his breath. So he went back to it, and allowed the thoughts of the mind to proceed like clouds above him ... Except after a few breaths, he was in the clouds again, being carried away on a train of thought. It continued like this for 20 minutes a day, every day. But both the book and Mr Hartmann claimed that this was the way it was going to be for the first few years, and it was going to do its work even if it felt like a total failure. In fact, being aware of just how unstable the mind was would be the most important lesson of his practice, and possibly the most important lesson of his life.

And gradually his thoughts became stronger and clearer. Perhaps it was the meditation, or perhaps his brain was still growing. But he became able to notice even more nuances. He became able to learn faster, remember better, see things in a wider context, understand things that had been murky. It was a gradual change, but over the course of spring, there was no denying it. Not only Mr Hartmann noticed, but the other teachers as well. He was becoming a bona fide genius, which quite a bit of progress, since a year ago he had no idea what "bona fide" even meant. It reminded him of "bone" and "Fido", the latter being a somewhat popular dog name, and that was pretty much where it would have stopped. But after having seen it in an online text once, he now had a pretty good idea what it meant. There were a lot of such things lately.

But more important than any of that, at least to himself, was that he could reach the magic more easily. It was not any stronger, and he could not do anything new; it was not even working reliably. But it was working *more* reliably. It went from working occasionally to working perhaps half the time, or even more than that in the case of the balls of light. He could now experiment with different colors, sizes and even shapes. It did not need to be balls of light anymore: It could be cubes, bars more than half a meter long, even pyramids and cones. He could still mostly do simple shapes; even if he tried to make something more complex, it usually ended up looking like a child's drawing. But sometimes he made something more complex, and it stayed that way for a little while. He was definitely becoming better. If he could make much more complex and lifelike shapes, and tuned down the luminosity further, he might even one day make an illusion that could fool someone for a short time.

Looking at a floating rough image of a human head, he wondered: Perhaps it was something like that his father had used when he made himself look different so people couldn't recognize him? But that would require making the illusion stay on top of his actual image. He could not imagine how much practice that would take. His mother better be right about his longevity!

With the end of April, it became obvious to Tormod that his middle school days were soon over. The teachers were buzzing about the upcoming exams. Of course, exams from middle school had relatively little to say for most teens, as the vast majority went on to a general high school with theoretical studies, very similar to middle school. Some were aiming for vocational high school, such as carpentry, auto or cooking / baking, or sports or music. Sports and music tended to require particular grades in these skills, which were pretty much disregarded everywhere else. Only auto and metal had any serious

competition to get in, and those largely appealed to students with little theoretical flair in the first place. Everyone was guaranteed entrance to a high school, no matter how badly they failed at everything, but it would be the nearest general high school. That was what 80-90% of the students wanted anyway, so not much of an "eye of a needle".

One difference was that the local high school was not as local as the middle school was. From now on, they would have to take the bus to Litlefjord, the actual recognized town down by the harbor, where they would be just a fourth or fifth of the students at the big education factory that was the high school there. Traditionally the kids from Heiedal would end up in the same class, but the middle school teachers could recommend otherwise in cases where they felt that having certain kids in the same class would be a recipe for trouble.

Roger had already announced his intention to study carpentry, so Tormod would likely not run into him on a daily basis. That was good. More worrying was that Rune seemed to simply not care. If he did not pick a vocational school, he would go to general high school, where he would be unable to achieve nothing but stirring up trouble. Already now he had pretty much stopped listening to the teachers or handing in homework. Rumor had it that he was already spending more time down in Litlefjord, where there was a modest amount of criminal activity already. Getting inside that as a freshman juvenile delinquent would not be easy. In the best case he would be discouraged and decide that a life of crime was not for him, although there wasn't much else he could do by now. Worst case, he would go to extremes to prove his toughness, and pull others with him in the process.

And of course for Tormod there was the more personal worry that even a personal self defense coach and the occasional time jump ability might not be enough to save his skin if his old nemesis gave himself completely over to his gangster delusions. The Berg twins were not the only ones who had a problem telling roleplay from reality. But they would outgrow it in a year at worst; Rune was done with his growing, it seemed, and was stuck in his delusions until death did them part.

As soon as the weather allowed it, the Magic Users Club had moved back into the Secret Hideout. They still gathered there each Thursday, and Tormod found that he still enjoyed it a great deal, even if he no longer dared to use his powers, limited though they were. They discussed the latest spells and rituals found on the Interweb, and their self-appointed scribe, the Dark Witch of Darkness, wrote their adapted versions with neat letters in blood-red gel pen on the black paper in their black binder. It was an oasis of freedom from the ordinary world. Until one night. They were in the last part of their weekly meeting when the door suddenly burst open, and some familiar but unwelcome faces showed up. It was as bad as it could be: Rune, visibly drunk, with his three stooges.

"Didn't think we would find you here, huh?"

"Rune! You are way too drunk to be this young! Have you come to play?"

"Yeah, I've come to play with your little girlfriend here." And just like that, he grabbed Andrea and held her hard. "You guys, make sure they don't do anything crazy."

I am sorry, Mom. I really am. I wouldn't defend myself, but this is on a completely

different level. I wonder how long it will take? I need to buy time.

He ignored the dizzying feeling when the spell took hold, and began speaking.

"Rune, this is not funny. This is a criminal assault. Police WILL get involved if you don't leave now."

"And who is gonna tell them? You? If you tell on me, I'm gonna break every bone in your body."

"I would not be surprised if you did. But if you do that, I die. And I don't really have any other enemies that are batshit insane, so you're going to prison for 21 years. I don't think you get out early for good behavior, because you don't know what good behavior is."

"Oh, I'm not gonna kill you. I'm just gonna make you wish you were dead."

"Well, then you need to limit the number of bones you break. Fingers and toes are fine, but ribs can easily puncture the lungs. Spines are also surprisingly necessary."

"That's fine, I'll start with all the fingers and toes and see how far I come before I stop having fun."

He was actually groping Andrea now. Steel resolve filled Tormod. If he had considered relenting, he did not consider that anymore.

"Couldn't you at least wait with this until you are sober? Maybe you will see things differently then."

"Like hell I will. We've waited too long already. You thought I'd never come for you, right? You thought I didn't dare attack you unless you were alone? I've seen how you're skulking around to avoid me. It's time you learn who's boss here. Hold him and the little boy."

"Are you sure we can't talk about this like adults? We are adults now, after all."

"I'm busy doing adult things here, if you hadn't noticed."

Oh, I've noticed for a while.

"Well, then I am sorry that it had to come to this. Andrea, you have my permission to summon the fires of the Netherworld. Remember the spell?"

Andrea stopped struggling. She lifted her arm and intoned: "NYX INFERNALIS, VOX INFERNALIS: INFLAMMO!"

Rune started laughing. "You don't scare me, you bitch!"

"Liar, liar, pants on fire" said Tormod quietly.

"What you saying, shrimp?"

"Boss! Your trousers!"

"They getting a little tight? Yeah, I guess it's time to let the..."

"They're smoking!"

"The hell?"

"Yeah" said Tormod. "The fires of hell. I wish your soul could be saved, Rune. I would wish nothing more. But it is too late now."

Rune let go of the girl, shoving her away and staring down. He took a couple steps back. His eyes bulged. Black patches appeared on his pants, spreading rapidly, oozing smoke. He beat at them. He screamed incoherently. And then his trousers burst into bright red and yellow flames.

Chapter 7: Slut training

Rune had tumbled out of the peat house. Now he was running around on the grass outside, screaming like a damned soul, which was probably not too far off. His three would-be henchmen had forgotten the club members and were running after him. The fire was spreading up to his shirt, and soon it was on fire too.

"This is getting out of hand." Tormod pulled off his jersey. "Get him down on the grass you buffoons! Roll him in the grass before he burns to death!"

Belatedly, they threw themselves on the screaming Rune and started to roll him in the green grass.

"Let him burn" said Andreas. His face was white, veins standing out in his temples. "Let him die and burn in Hell!"

"Life is short, death is long." Tormod ran over to where the smoldering boy was being inefficiently put out by his drunk comrades. He tried to put out more of the fires with his jersey, but the burning boy, panicked, lashed out at him and threw him away. The clothes were still burning in places. Rune kicked and slugged at his friends who were trying to put out his fires, but finally he collapsed and lost consciousness. Tormod put out the rest of the fire and started pulling off the half-burned clothes. The skin beneath was red from burns and black from soot.

"Andrea! Can you get the rest of the soda to cool down the burns." Tormod fished out his smartphone. *Remember to breathe. Don't panic. A bit late for that anyway.* He dialed the emergency number.

"Medical emergency assistance."

"Heiedal, we have a patient with burns, probably second degree, across much of his body."

"Where in Heiedal?"

"A small peat house east-northeast of Sildrebekk road."

"We are sending an ambulance. Your name is?"

"Tormod Rannveigson Øygaard. I am not the patient."

"Do you have the name of the patient?"

"Rune Lyngen. Not sure about any middle names, he doesn't use them."

"How far from the road?"

"About 200 meters, I'm afraid. We will have someone standing by the road, dressed in black."

"Ambulance is on its way."

"How the hell did that happen?" asked one of the henchmen, looking rather forlorn without his boss.

"Magic. You don't attack witches and wizards if you want to live happily ever after. As for you three, we know you were just following orders. We have spared you. Don't think we could not kill you easily. And even if you killed us first, our fellow wizards would avenge us in such a way that you would beg the Devil to let you into Hell and he would

not dare to."

"This is madness."

"This is Sparta!"

The henchmen cringed.

"Andreas, go to the road and direct the emergency crew."

"He should just die."

"He just might, but at least we will be better off if we try to help him. Andrea, you stay with me. I am not letting anyone near you until help arrives."

She was already standing behind him, putting him between herself and the boys who loitered aimlessly around their fallen comrade. Perhaps the large quantities of alcohol he had drunk contributed to him staying unconscious. It has almost certainly contributed to him neglecting the heat until it was too late. That, and his arousal, and possibly the distraction of threatening Tormod at the same time. This was not a strategy that would have worked in any and every confrontation.

The minutes were quite long until they heard the sirens, and then again until two men came hurrying with a stretcher.

"Will he survive?" asked one of the boys as the paramedics checked Rune.

"Don't see why not. Most of the burns are first and second degree. But he'll probably stay in hospital for a while."

There were more sirens. Not surprising. Police was coming. Only the paramedics and Tormod remained calm. The twins looked rather nervous as well.

"Andrea, when the police start questioning, give them your lighter. Don't be afraid to admit that you set him on fire. We'll all testify that it was self defense. He was trying to rape you. He should be glad to survive."

"But ... The magic. We were supposed to keep it secret."

"Well, you can still do that. You do have a lighter after all. Lighters can set pants on fire. It seems unlikely that they will believe you did it with a spell. These three boys will know, of course, but the police will believe that you distracted him with your 'spell' while setting him on fire with the lighter when everyone else was looking at your other hand."

"I thought we were safe here."

"We're still safe here. More than ever. No one messes with the Wizards' Guild twice."

"Well, that was not what I hoped to hear." Tormod's mother looked at him rather disapprovingly. Of course, she had been pretty worried when he called and told them he was being questioned by the police. Now that he had come home and told her the whole story in great detail, her feelings seemed more mixed. "I thought we had an agreement that you would not set people on fire and I would not lock you up in a closet. I am pretty sure those were the terms."

"Well, you dictated those, but yeah. It doesn't matter. Lock me up, throw me out if you will. Beat me black and blue. I don't just stand by watching people rape my friend if there is anything at all I can do to stop it."

"And this was all you could do?"

"At that time, yes. If he had come alone, I might have fought him. If he had been sober, I might have been able to reason with him. Light knows I tried. If I had not been cornered, I might have run away and called for help. But I had two big guys on me, and Anders had a third. I did what had to be done, and I will pay any price needed."

"Duly noted. Do your best on your exams, then. The boarding school I have in mind has very high requirements."

"Mom! You really are sending me away?"

"And it's breaking my heart. I would rather lose both my eyes. But you must be protected at all cost. When the time comes, you will protect this world and all who live on it. But for now, you are the one who must be protected. You have too many enemies here, and now that the kiddie gloves are off, the risk is too high. I have to hope that, in a place where you start from scratch, you will be able to live for a year or two without setting anyone on fire. By then you should hopefully be strong enough to defend yourself and others without using your powers openly."

"I did not use them openly! Nobody knows it was me! I need to stay here to protect Andrea!"

"No, you need to stay away from her. I'll drive you to school and pick you up from school until you graduate. Then you spend the summer with my sister Gunnhild and her family. Protecting Andrea is the job of her parents. I am going to talk with them, you are not."

"You don't understand! She is in danger!"

"Yes, because you encouraged her to hang out with someone who has criminally insane enemies. If not for you, none of this would have happened. She and her brother would probably soon have tired of wearing black and collecting magic spells from the Interweb. You caused this. You had the best intentions, and this still happened. You still have the best intentions, and Light only knows what happens next."

Tormod only heard a fraction of all the rumors, but the official version seemed to be the most widespread: Rune had tried to rape Andrea, and she had set his pants on fire while Tormod distracted him and his mooks with fancy talk.

The version told by Rune's fellow thugs was that Andrea had set him on fire with a demonic spell, and Tormod had threatened that the wizards union or some such would set them all on fire if they tried anything again.

Now, this was Norway in the 21st century. Normal people didn't believe in magic until they saw it. So the official version prevailed, with a number of variations. The police had the lighter with only her fingerprints on, so the case was closed as far as they were concerned. Clear self defense, no charges. If Rune's mother wanted to take it to court, she could, but as far as the police was concerned, there was nothing more to do.

The news from the hospital was that Rune wasn't coming back for at least a month.

"I've talked with Mrs Berg" said Tormod's mother. "They are pretty optimistic about the whole thing. It seems that Rune is not coming back anytime soon. His mother has finally realized that things have gotten out of hand, and is moving home to her family with him, to get him out of the criminal milieu down in the town. Her brother is a big

guy who will keep tabs on him. Obviously that won't happen until he is out of the hospital. You did quite a number on the kid."

"I'll try to not make it a habit. Unless they tick me off."

"Don't joke about it. This is your chance to survive until you become invulnerable."

"I'll become invulnerable?"

"Probably. Or at least invisible. That should help a great deal."

"Not quite the same thing, but I'll take what I can get."

"I'm going to miss you like crazy, but my sister seems super happy to have you stay with them for the summer. Don't have sex with your cousin, you might get drooling babies with too many or too few fingers and toes."

"I was not really planning to. She looked like a boy the one time I saw her."

"I have on good authority that she is a girl now, so behave."

"I'll totally be haveing."

"You haven't had sex with the Berg girl yet, right?"

"What do you mean yet? Because of you, I'll never have sex with her!"

"I feel your pain. It hurts so bad. Now ace your exams so I don't need to enroll you in military academy."

"Do we even have military academies in Norway?"

"Not that I know. But I actually have a cousin in America. I'll do what it takes to keep you safe."

"I don't think we should use the words 'safe' and 'America' in the same conversation, let alone the same breath."

"I actually breathed in between there."

And so he was on the train. A rare mode of transportation for Tormod, unavailable where he had lived for the past 10 years. There had been a disproportionate amount of hugging, especially considering that the hugger was the one who kicked him out. His grandma, on the other hand, put considerable effort into not concealing her glee. "Good riddance, hellspawn" is not really the most common parting phrase among relatives (although it may be among spouses breaking up). He had stared her down:

"One day I will have power beyond your wildest imagination" he had said, boring his eyes into hers. "And then I will return. And I will *heal you*."

"Like hell you will" she had said.

"Something like that" he had said amicably.

And now the train rolled into the station. Grabbing his big travel trunk, he followed the other passengers out on the platform. He looked around, but saw no one familiar, so he started trudging toward the station. Someone was coming up beside him, but did not pass him. Instead she just kept walking by his side. He finally turned his head, and a boyish grin met him. Her dark brown hair was as short as it used to be, she was ridiculously tan for a Norwegian, and in awesome shape - probably as strong as he was, he thought - but she definitely was a young woman now. There were bumpers front and back, not that he more than just noticed them. "Birgitte!"

"Took you long enough, matchstick. Now drop that luggage and let me squish you."

Birgitte was a year older than him, and looked grown-up for her age, in stark contrast to him, who still looked like he was waiting for confirmation.

"Well, you survived my bear hug, that is a good sign. Maybe you can carry your own luggage after all."

"I've been working out a little."

"Me too."

"No doubt. You look pretty athletic."

"You may say that. I'm captain of our school handball team, and also dabbling in judo and karate on my free time. Karate is terribly misunderstood, by the way."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, people think it is all about crushing bricks with your hands."

"No, seriously you're practicing martial arts?"

"Yep. Not competition level, but a girl got to be able to defend herself."

"Can you train me? I started to train with our P.E teacher, but then various things happened and I had to stay out of town for a while."

"Various things as in setting some guy on fire? I heard about it, you know. You may need to get pretty good at self defense if you keep getting into trouble like that."

"Well, officially it was the girl who set him on fire. I just distracted him."

"Unofficially, your mom destroyed the evidence, I've heard. Do you usually go around with infrared lasers on you?"

"Uh, not anymore. But you got to admit it came in handy."

"Yeah. I was kind of hoping you would get me one as well. Sounds like fun."

"They take entirely too long time to set people's pants on fire. I had to distract him with long lectures. If he hadn't been drunk, he would have noticed before they started smoking."

"Ahaha! I wish I was there."

"I wish you were there too. You would have wiped the floor with them."

"Flattery won't get you anywhere but home. And yeah, of course I will train you."

"Welcome to us, Tormod! My, you sure have grown!"

"Uh, it's been like ten years..."

"Nine" said Birgitte. "You were so small and cute back then!"

"And you looked like a boy."

"I sure did! And I fought like one too. Now I fight smarter."

"Did you know she is doing judo and karate?"

"It was one of the first things I told him, mom."

"She has offered to train me. I sure could need it."

"Yes, Rannveig told me you got in trouble back home. Sucks, doesn't it? For what it's worth, I think you did the right thing protecting that girl. And I say that as a certified slut."

"Village tricycle, mom. You were the *village tricycle*."

"Ahaha, that's so true! All the boys started with me before they moved on."

"If there were more sluts in the world, the world would be a better place" said

Birgitte with conviction. "Boys tend to have a more practical approach to sex, they know they need practice to be good at anything. Perhaps it's because boys are usually into sports, so they know how important practice is."

This is veering into embarrassing territory pretty fast.

"Many girls don't really like to think about sex when they are young" continued Birgitte. "They want to save themselves for marriage, or at least for love, which is fine by me. But then they expect the boys to magically know how to do it right, without any of them giving them the chance to practice. That doesn't really compute, see? So that's why the world needs a reasonable supply of sluts."

"Teaching is an important job" agreed Aunt Gunnhild.

"I am not sure I want to think of a relative as a slut" Tormod admitted. "Sex educator, perhaps."

"Well, it is just a shorthand" said his aunt. "I like to use it casually so as to not enable slut shaming."

"I'm not really a slut yet" admitted Birgitte, "but I am working on it. Perhaps if I was less physically imposing, boys would find me more approachable."

"The slut / stud dichotomy is a tool of the Patriarchy" said Aunt Gunnhild. "All the more sad that it is often, or even primarily, perpetuated by women. This is why we need feminism even here in Norway."

"And sluts. Lots and lots of sluts" added her daughter. "But first, we need dinner. I'm ravishing."

"Ravenous. Famished."

"Stuff like that."

First dinner, then sluts. This is my lucky day. Except not really. They're my family and I better not forget it.

"You've had a great teacher" said Birgitte and looked down on her half cousin as he laid on the floor. "Your basics are rock solid. And your stamina rocks. You just need more agility, more stances and moves, and more experience."

"We only had time for the basics, before ... the incident." He sat up.

"He must have been really good then. Funny enough, I think it may have helped that you did not have much practice from fighting as a boy. Lots of people get wrong habits in childhood and these take over automatically when they feel threatened."

"That's pretty much what he said too. He also taught me meditation. It is awesome. I feel like my mind has grown so much lately. Like I used to see things in black and white before. Or with one eye. It is hard to explain."

"I bet. Speaking of eyes, are those real? No contacts? I seem to remember you having very green eyes when you were a kid too, but ... I've never seen anyone like you."

"Sometimes I wonder whether I should get contacts. And dye my hair. I kind of stand out a lot. That has not really served me well so far."

"You know, that may not be a crazy idea. You could get brown contacts and dye your hair brown. That color would easily blend with and camouflage your natural colors. Brown eyes and brown hair is a natural combination, in fact if you mix red and green

that is what you get, so I think that would be the best choice. But you're really handsome the way you are. I like it."

"Uh, thank you."

"Plus brown would make you look more like a relative of us."

"Yeah, yeah, I like your hair and eyes too." He smiled.

"Good. You need to learn to compliment people. If you don't hate something, you like it. People like to hear that. Well, you may not want to compliment boys on their body, I guess. Although we girls do that with each other all the time. Another tool of the Patriarchy, no doubt." She grinned. "Now, let me show you the best stances against a much larger opponent. It is hard to practice it realistically with just us two since we are around the same size, but you are a quick learner. It should help somewhat at least."

"Well, it ended up more auburn than our shade of brown, but at least it is not strawberry red anymore. Until it grows back out, of course." Birgitte seemed quite satisfied with her work actually.

"The funny part is that this is the first time in my life I don't look like I've dyed my hair." Tormod looked at the result in the mirror. It looked strangely believable, if unfamiliar.

"Of course, we haven't dyed the hair down there, so the moment you undress, the gig is up."

"Uh oh. I am not sure what that mercantile high school is like, but chances are that since it is a high school, we will need to have some P.E. And then shower."

"That is your concern? I was thinking more what the girls will say. You are sure you are straight?"

"So far it certainly feels that way. Unless I suddenly one day meet the man in my life, but I really doubt that by now."

"Anyway, you could just shave that hair. If anyone asks, just say you got lice from a girl you slept with. Condoms don't protect against lice, you know that?"

"Could we please not talk about that?"

"Well, it is important information for teenagers. Everyone needs to know."

They had asked their mothers first, who left the decision to Tormod. In the end he went through with the hair dye. It looked good enough that he decided to stick with it for a while at least. Getting colored contacts was going to take a bit longer, it was not like those could be bought at the supermarket. He still wasn't sure about that, but anything that could make him more anonymous was probably a good thing. He really needed to not set any more people on fire for a while!

"I need to introduce you to some of my friends and see how they react" said Birgitte. "I'm sorry, but not many of my friends are girls, so the chance of getting any booty may be slim. Unless, you know."

"Booty is not expected, matey. My priority when dealing with humans is to not murder or be murdered. I seem to have some kind of 'uncanny valley' effect on a lot of people."

"You don't really have a valley dialect though."

"No, it refers to some psychological theory, that humans are primed to reject beings that are almost but not perfectly human. Probably something going back to when our ancestors shared the world with Neanderthals and Denisovans, and before that a bunch of other variants. Those who mated with the not quite human people presumably did not have as much offspring or something, so we are the descendants of those who stuck to their own kind. Racism may come from this instinct being miscalibrated so they reject people who actually are people. Or perhaps those are just douchebags."

"Well, I think you looked great, and still do. I'd totally do you if our moms hadn't promised each other not to. Like they think I'd forget to take my Pill or something. Besides, there's rubbers and stuff. But my mom gave her word, so."

"You can't be too careful. My mom thinks my sperm is like heat seeking missiles or something." *I really should not say that out loud. But it was worth it to hear her laugh.*

"I bet! Look, it's OK. You'll find someone. I can't be the only sane girl in the world. Besides, your mom obviously liked your dad. So one day you'll find a great girl. Or a bunch of them."

"I would be fine with just one. If she actually was sane."

"Do you also sometimes feel like you just woke up?" asked Tormod after another training session.

"Every day!" said Birgitte with conviction. "Usually around lunchtime." She grinned at him. Now that they had summer vacation, both of them were sleeping in every day, but for him that meant 9, for her it meant somewhere between 10 and 11, sometimes even longer.

"Yeah, you sure are a night owl..."

"Sure am! Did you know that I usually wake up with my butt sticking out of the bed sheets?"

"I take your word for it."

"Does that turn you on? I've found that just telling turns on some boys instantly. Like flipping a switch."

"Thanks for trying."

"No problem. I love finding out what makes boys tick. It is super fascinating. I *love* boys."

"No, but seriously, what I meant was ... Do you sometimes feel like your whole life until recently was a kind of dream, a sleepwalking? As if things were not really real before, not the way they are real now."

"Hmm, well my memories tend to get more hazy the further back they go, I think. But it's not like there is some magic point where I stop being one person and become another. I have always been me and always had the same tendencies. Of course my interests have branched out a bit, but no, I have not Awakened to my Higher Self or anything like that."

"Actually I think it started before I began meditating, although it has accelerated this spring and summer. Perhaps I am finally growing up. Everything is so much clearer. And

it is much easier to grasp the magic as well."

"Magic?"

Oh, manure.

Chapter 8: Thought and action are one

"Wait, did you just become flustered?" Tormod had accidentally mentioned his magic, and realized too late that he had slipped a dangerous secret to his talkative and overly friendly half-cousin. She might act like they were really close, but there was no way he could let her know about his alien wizard powers, tiny though they might be. That was how things got out of hand in the first place, and why he was now separated from his mother for weeks on end, for the first time in his life.

"Magic!" she said, and looked at him closely. "Oh my. I can see your mind racing. You are totally trying to hide something. Magic! Magic magic magic!"

"Would you stop that?"

"When I find out what you are hiding, sure."

OK, this better work...

"You know the girl that my enemy was trying to ... molest or something? She and her twin brother and me, we were in a role playing club. Do you know about role playing games?"

"Yeah. Two of my guy friends are totally into that! Not my thing, I mean role playing in the bedroom is fine, but the game thing. One of them said that their game was better than sex. That was before he had ever had sex, obviously. They have books and 20-sided dice. Seriously, 20-sided! They even have a name for it..."

"Dungeons and dragons?"

"That's the game, I think. I mean, they had a name for 20-sided dice. Decameron? No, that's one of my mom's books. Some weird name anyway."

"Well, what we are doing is called a LARP, a Live Action Role Playing game. Basically we are acting out the game. So for instance you cast a fire spell and then you set things on fire. That's how we ended up with lighters and, uh, slightly overpowered lasers."

"Ah, the *magic!*"

"So we had these complex spells and rules and rituals and such. So now that I am smarter, I can grasp them much more easily. But I did not plan to mention that to you. It is terribly nerdy, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah, but it is not a deal breaker. Unless you say it is better than sex, *after* you have had sex. In that case it is definitely a deal breaker."

"Could we please not talk about sex? All the time?"

"But you are so cute when you blush, I can't stop myself!"

Actually it is safer for me to talk about sex than magic. Operation distraction: Successful!

"Guys, this is Tormod, my cousin that I talked about. Tormod, this is Odd and Even, my role playing friends."

"You guys are seriously named Odd and Even?"

"What? Those are traditional Norwegian names like your own."

"Yeah, but in English..."

"Yeah, pretty cool, huh?"

Odd was skinny, even more than Tormod himself. He seemed a little unhealthy, truth to tell, in a fragile sort of way. In contrast, Even was overweight if not clinically obese. He seemed a little unhealthy too, but in the opposite way of his friend. They were both rather pale for this time of the year, but so was he. He burned easily, and despite his cousin dragging him outside, he soon sought shadow wherever he could find it, even after being rubbed in with sun oil almost all over his body. Getting a tan was just not in his genes, getting sunburn was. Or at least that had happened each summer until he learned to take care. These two, on the other hand, had clearly taken care for a very long time.

"So I hear you guys are playing D&D. What edition are you using?"

"Huh? The *real* one, of course. There is only one true D&D." Even sniffed.

"The third edition" clarified Odd. "It is clearly superior in every way to every other role playing system under the sun."

"In the galaxy" amended Even.

"You should tell him about your latest campaign" prompted Birgitte. "I'll get some soda."

"Well, don't laugh," began Odd cautiously, "but we actually decided to use the Forgotten Realms as a basis for our campaign. Yes, the paperback novels are terrible, they are basically just juvenile wish fulfillment fantasies, especially anything involving Elminster is just painfully obvious Mary Sue."

"Marty Stue."

"It's a literary concept" explained Even. "The author is writing himself into the story as the perfect character that can never do anything really wrong and his only flaw is that he is too humble."

"I know."

"What kind of author would do that, seriously? It is just embarrassing to read. Imagine you were a kid who got bullied in school and later you sat down and wrote a story about a kid who looked vaguely like yourself and got bullied in school but then he gradually developed superpowers and became able to do all kinds of amazing stuff, but when his former enemies came crawling back in shame, instead of kicking them in the arse so hard his boot remained in there, he saved their worthless hides and became the protector of the world and blah blah. Imagine how your friends and family would feel reading that kind of story. They would hide their face in shame and refuse to admit that they knew you."

"So about the Forgettable Realms."

"Forgotten. The thing is, there are just so many good source books, maps, lore, all kinds of stuff that you can take right out of the box or adapt to your own use. And it spans across so many different areas and so many different levels of difficulty, you can basically start with a brand new character and develop them all the way to demigod without ever leaving the Forgotten Realms."

"Right."

"So, I made a half-orc fighter" said Odd. "Did you know that half-orcs were banned from the game for a while? Because in America, they were worried that people role playing half-orcs would become evil in real life. Americans are crazy."

"No disagreement on that. Even Americans say so."

"So I made a half-orc fighter who wields a broadsword. I am trying to put more points into heavy armor these days, but he has a lot of health so it has worked out fairly well. It helps that Even here is a female cleric with lots of healing power."

"Healing power is always useful" said Tormod blandly. *Even if I seem only able to heal myself.*

"It's role playing" said Even defensively. "There is no need for your character to look or act like yourself."

"Not at all" agreed Tormod. "I mean, if someone is an arch-wizard in a game, you don't go around expecting him to cast magic spells in real life. Like setting people on fire or something."

This is insane. Tormod was looking at half a dozen "guy friends" of Birgitte. Half a soccer team, more like it. These were not role playing nerds. They were what he'd call "sports idiots", or jocks. Although they did not look entirely vacant in the head, they were spending more time working out than reading books, he strongly suspected. The day still has only 24 hours, after all. They all looked stronger than average, and he was not. And he knew what being strong meant to boys: A licence to bully. More like an obligation, it sometimes seemed. With half a dozen of them here, there was a 330% chance of being brutally attacked. Why had he gone along with this crazy plan?

Oh yes, that girl over there. Momentarily he felt like agreeing with a couple old religions that claimed that a woman was the cause of all misery that came into the world, whether she ate a forbidden fruit or opened a forbidden box or whatever. But on the other hand, all people also came into the world because of women, and so Evolution - or whoever it was - had ordained that he had to be drawn to them anyway, no matter how much trouble they caused. And even if he could not actually make use of her much needed elite slut skills, seeing how he supposedly had quantum tunneling, heat-seeking sperm cells which would result in babies with an unpredictable number of webbed fingers and toes, or worse, wizard powers. Possibly all of the above.

He had spent a good part of his summer here already. He had befriended her two role playing friends, and two more friends of theirs who were into collectible trading card games, at which he reliably beat them after a few days, much to their surprise. They thought they were smart, and they were, but only as smart as he had been before he started with meditation. Now, he was ... different. Smart people saw things that were not obvious. He could see even things that *were* obvious, so obvious that no one else even noticed. This must be how Isaac Newton felt when he saw an apple falling and realized the theory of gravity. It was as if everything in the world was beginning to make sense. Everything except people, and girls in particular.

"This is my half-cousin Tormod. He is living with us this summer after putting his big, angry classmate in the hospital for a couple months. It wasn't a fair fight, though. The

big guy only had three helpers, while Tormod had a little girl and her sickly brother."

The guys looked at him with cautious disbelief.

"Tormod, let us spar. First we do those warm-up exercises you taught me."

"Tai chi, my teacher called them. Supposedly they build up our inner energy."

They did the flowing stretching exercises first, then faced each other. They had done this for weeks, and when they started to move, it felt like a dance rather than a fight. She was slightly stronger, but that did not matter. She was more agile, which mattered a whole lot. But he was faster. He was faster than he had ever been. During these summer weeks his body had sped up even more, so much so that he was baffled at his own speed. He had been the slowest in his class, except the one who was badly overweight. But now it was as if he only had to think, and his body moved.

The boys just stood and stared as Birgitte and Tormod feinted, jumped, kicked, threw each other, rolled and jumped back up in one fluid motion. It was fun, a bit like how ballet or figure skating looked, but of course they were aware that one day they might need to use these moves to defend themselves or someone else. And even this "dance" could have been quite dangerous if they had not eased into it through weeks of practice. There were still moves that were too difficult for him, but she did not use them here. As it was, he had already learned so many different stances, feints, moves and throws that they did not need to repeat the same ones all the time. They went through the whole repertoire he had practiced so far, then she stopped.

"Whew, I'm winded. Your stamina is incredible. I am sure you could keep going all night." She grinned, as if she had said something funny.

"Dude, that was awesome" said one of the boys. "It was like watching a Kung Fu movie!" Actually it was mostly judo, but there was no point in sweating the details.

"Yeah" said another, "remind me not to pick a fight with you unless there is a cute nurse at the hospital!"

"The greatest victory is won without bloodshed" quoted Tormod. His teacher had been right all along.

It was August, and summer vacation was drawing toward its inevitable end. Tormod had missed his mother a little, but they talked on the phone pretty much every day, although their talks became shorter at the summer wore on.

In the beginning of August, his aunt and cousin took him on a week's car trip in Europe. They drove first to Sweden, from there over the bridge to Denmark, then through Germany to Switzerland. It was kind of funny, it felt like they came back to where they returned. Switzerland was a lot like Norway, only without fjords. But it had lakes. Summer in the foothills of the mountains was not unlike summer back in Norway, with cows grazing in the hillsides and majestic mountains in the background. The prices were high too. Afterwards they drove through France, Belgium and the Netherlands on their way home.

So many languages, and the only one Tormod had learned except for Norwegian and English was Spanish, which they did not need at all. He had borrowed a couple tourist books and learned a bunch of useful phrases in German and French, but in the end he

hardly understood a word when the language was actually used around him. If only there were a better way to learn languages! Perhaps a smartphone app where you could start from the basics, listening to the language while translating back and forth between the two languages... Perhaps one day he would make something like that. If people understood each other's languages, think of all the cooperation and creativity that could be unleashed!

Or they could just have bothered to learn English properly, like Norwegians did. The French in particular seemed to hold an irrational hate for English, while the Germans liked to pretend that they could use it, but actually spoke it rather badly. Only teenagers like himself spoke English as well as he did. One evening at a camping ground, Birgitte and Tormod had been hanging out with a bunch of high schoolers. They spoke English passably, and so did Tormod. Birgitte did not speak English quite as well as he did, but she spoke body language better and soon became the natural focal point of the small crowd. She told Tormod in Norwegian that the blond girl with the small tattoo had the hots for him, but she did not speak English as well as most of the rest, and he did not speak body language well, so in the end they did not come very far. They did sit close beside each other under the stars listening to music though, so that was worth remembering. She even took his hand, but then suddenly she stared at him wide-eyed, said something in German and ran off. Oh well. At least he was not the only weird teenager in the world!

From Denmark they took the ferry back to Norway and drove home. It was just a week and two weekends, but they were more than fed up with living in tent and hostels.

"Home, sweet home!" Birgitte threw herself face down on the couch and wiggled her backside vigorously. "I'm gonna take a long shower and then visit one of my boyfriends. It's been way too long. And being cooped up with a boy I can't even kiss doesn't make things better."

"I'm not feeling too good myself" said her mother. "I think I'm gonna call a coworker. Save some hot water, OK?"

"You gals are ... a bit different from my mom."

"As far as you know" grinned Aunt Gunnhild. "But then she's only my half-sister, so who knows. Besides, having a demigod for a lover may spoil a girl, I guess."

Tormod stared at his aunt, frozen in shock. She was still grinning.

"You... You know?"

"Your origin story is not exactly a state secret" she said, giggling. "And I've had a couple guys myself who were just incredible in the hay. I would have followed them to the ends of the world if they hadn't managed to hide from me. But for me, having a gourmet meal doesn't mean I'll never eat pizza again. In the end, pizza is still pretty good."

So that was what she meant! His mother must have confided in her, but not in much detail. And with her one-track imagination, of course she would have heard it that way. He suddenly found himself laughing too. Even Birgitte, which had probably not followed the conversation, looked at them and joined in laughing.

Tormod was not entirely sure when he became aware of the electrical cables in the walls. He had known they were there all along, of course: Electricity is not magic. Or at least he had assumed until now that it was not. But at some point during the summer he had slowly begun to know not just that they were there, but exactly *where* they went, even when they were completely hidden inside the walls. Before that, he had just felt the presence of electricity as a soft hum that was always around him, like living some distance from a waterfall: You could always hear it, but you never really noticed it. But lately he had noticed, and he could tell exactly where they were, when he was reasonably close. A couple meters was enough, so when he was lying in the guest room, he could pretty much follow them all around the room. He did not actually literally see them, but he could still tell exactly. He was pretty sure normal people didn't do that. Was this another alien wizard thing?

So one morning, he got up after lying in bed a little while sensing the power cables all around him. He went over to the corner where they went from near the floor and up to provide power to the ceiling lamp. Cautiously he reached out and held his hand against the wall. And there he saw them. He saw through the wallpaper and the planks, to the space inside the wall, and the cables running up inside. He would not even have known which corner they were in if he had not sensed them at a distance. But now he could actually see them, they seemed to glow with the enormous power coursing inside them.

He moved his hand further over the wall. His X-ray vision had increased! It used to only reach 2-3 centimeters out from his body (although it showed everything inside it, eww) but now it was easily 10 cm. He was not entirely sure when and how this had happened, since he did not use it much. What do you use a 2 cm x-ray vision for? But with this range, he might actually use it to see if someone else's bones were broken or fractured; practically all bones are within 10 cm from the surface. Certainly any you would break and not die on the spot. Perhaps he might be able to direct his healing energies better as well. He had very rarely used those, for the obvious reason that there was very rarely a need to. Anything small enough that he could heal it would heal on its own, and anything else would send people scurrying to the doctor. For an X-ray, definitely. Nobody was going to ask him to perform it at home! Well, perhaps his mom, but when would he be with her again?

The X-ray thing were still in the back of his mind later in the day when he came into the living room and saw Birgitte reading by the table. As she sometimes did, when she was reading at all instead of watching the TV or messing with computer, she was kneeling in the chair, resting her arms on the table. This left her backside very round and readily accessible, but he was pretty sure that was not why she did it, since she had no idea that he was going to come in right then, and besides he was not exactly in her butt display focus group. Still ... just this once ...

He walked over behind her, as casually as he could, and held his hand a few cm from her behind. Sure enough, when he refocused his mental sight, he could see through her jeans to the naked skin underneath. Actually, there wasn't much he hadn't seen before

when she was wearing a bikini, and he might even have seen her reading in that outfit for all that he remembered. But seeing it without her knowing felt disturbingly evil. It was a feeling he was not used to. He was totally a peeping tom! But at the same time, a part of him was looking *through* her skin, seeing the muscles and fat on her glutes. Although she was muscular for a girl, she actually had a good deal of pale fat all over that part; he had not been aware of exactly how fat and muscles were distributed on the female buttock. It was fascinating and a little icky. He briefly wondered if he would never be able to see a woman's skin without seeing what was within it. The Universe sure was swift in its retribution!

He suddenly became aware that Birgitte had turned her head and was looking at him, standing there with his hand over her buttock, staring intently. He pulled his hand away as if burned.

"How long were you planning to stand there debating with yourself?" she asked. "I could practically hear your thoughts. 'Should I give in to my sinful impulses and molest my innocent cousin, mentally scarring her for life and condemning myself to an eternity of guilt for the vile crime of incest? Or should I just keep standing here, imagining how delicious it would feel?'"

"That was not exactly it" he said. *Actually I was X-raying your buttock. You see, my entire body is emitting invisible but hopefully harmless X-rays that I can use to see through anything within a 10 cm distance, including your skin.* "Nope."

"Oh, come on. You have already sinned in your heart, or you would not be doing what you did."

"Uh, I just wanted to look..."

"With your hand."

"It is hard to explain..."

"I bet it is hard. You just wanted to see my ass with your hand. The way blind people see, with their fingertips. 'If only I were blind, I would have to use my fingers to explore every inch of her body, starting with her luscious ass...'"

"No, that's not it!"

She stood up and took his hand, placing it between both of hers. "I know it is hard to be you, living in celibacy during the years of your life when ... when ..."

I wish I could tell her everything. My X-ray vision, all my other powers. That my dad was a literal demigod, an immensely powerful magical being from a parallel world, and I am beginning to be like him. Sensing the electricity in the wall. Seeing through walls and clothes and skin. That I can heal myself and weave light. That I literally set that boy on fire with my mind. That I am afraid of myself more than of anyone else. I wish I did not always have to hide the truth of who I am.

"OMG!" she stared at him. "What are you doing to me?" She let go of his hand and backed away.

"What?"

"In my head ... You were talking to me in my head! That was you right now, wasn't it? Talking about your X-ray vision and setting people on fire. You really are some kind of alien! OMG!"

Chapter 9: I will learn to survive

Things had become a bit chaotic after Birgitte read Tormod's mind. She had been all pale and wide-eyed and then run out of the room. She had found her mother, who had calmed her down, put her to bed and stayed with her until she fell asleep. When she woke up, she was all embarrassed and weird, thinking she had had a kind of mental breakdown. And he dared not tell her the truth: Even if she had believed it, she was clearly not able to handle it.

That evening, he took a walk well away from the house when talking to his mother.

"Mom, could my dad read minds or let other people read his? Like talking in their heads?"

"Well of course! Haven't I told you? When we kissed, he could feel my enjoyment of it and I could feel his. And he could feel me feeling both of them, and I could feel him feeling that, and ... well, things escalated pretty quickly as you can imagine. I never told you?"

"I never wanted to hear about your love life, mom. But then it is true. I can probably read and send thoughts when touching people."

"You probably can by now. You are growing up so fast! It is amazing."

"It is scary. Mom, can I come home a little early? I don't think I can stay here after what happened?"

"What happened?" And so he had to tell her pretty much everything.

He had been supposed to come home the next week anyway, just for a few days before moving to the boarding school. Now he was home almost a week. One of the first thing they tried when he came home was testing his telepathy. It worked, unreliably like everything else, but when holding hands he could read her thoughts and send his own thoughts to her. That definitely explained the episode with Birgitte. It did not work every time, but usually it worked at least one way. Luckily it seemed to require an act of will or at least want. With Birgitte, he had actively wanted someone to understand him, although he had not know that it was possible. Unfortunately she had not been able to handle that understanding. His mother was, but ... Her experience of telepathy had been with his father, not him. It was kind of awkward sitting there holding hands with his mother while she shared memories of her lovey-dovey days with his father. So the tests came to a bit of an early stop.

He had talked with Andrea. Her brother Andreas was still upset at him for not killing Rune, or at least just letting him die. Andrea was more pensive. She was not entirely sure what had really happened. "I used to feel the magic, but after you left, I could not feel it anymore. It felt like it was all something I had borrowed from you" she admitted. "The black dress, the black nails and lips, the black book ... It all felt like just a game. I packed it away. It is still in a box in the attic. But I'm trying to get over it now. You know the song? 'I don't cry for yesterday, there's an ordinary world, somehow I have to find.' I've played that probably 500 times since you left. Everything in it is about you."

He found it online afterwards. "Ordinary world" by Duran Duran. He swallowed hard as the song went on.

What is happening to me?

Crazy some will say.

Where is my friend when I need you most?

Gone away.

But I won't cry for yesterday;

There's an ordinary world,

Somehow I have to find.

And as I try to find my way

To the ordinary world

I will learn to survive...

He had brought the magic into her life, then taken it with him and left. It had not been his choice. He wished he could have stayed in that world with her forever. But that was too late now. He had gone away and was going even further away. She was already learning to survive in an ordinary world.

He, on the other hand, would have to learn to survive in an extraordinary world. As his powers grew - and there was no denying now, they were growing - he would have to learn to be able to set people on fire but not do it. He would have to learn to be able to heal people and not do it. He would have to learn to be able to read minds and not reveal it. He might actually be able to fly and walk through walls eventually, perhaps. It was not sure he would inherit ALL of his father's powers. But even if he did, he would not be able to actually do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. He would have to hide those powers, like he was hiding now, hiding everything he could do. Pretending to live in the ordinary world.

Every world is my world... He wondered about that.

The boarding school looked old. Not worn, but old in style. It had been around for decades already as a school, run by a religious organization but with a 100% secular curriculum and very high standards of teaching and equipment. But the buildings had either been around well before that again, or else they were deliberately built in an older, more classical style. The build quality was good though. Tormod had put his hand on the outer wall as soon as he arrived in his dorm room, and inspected it. The electrical cables were also working just fine, the flow of energy unimpeded. He could sense it all around him.

There were of course separate dorms for boys and girls. At least it was not an all-boys school, despite its religious roots. Still, this was going to be quite a change. Not least because he was going to have a roommate. Most of the rooms had two beds, and his was one of them. He could not easily ask to get a single room. What was he going to say? "I have magic powers and I like to create floating lights in my bedroom"? No, he

would just have to go with it and hope that his roommate was someone he did not need to set on fire. That would be a terribly bad habit to get into.

As it happened, his roommate showed up later in the day. It was a boy not much older than himself, although of course he looked a couple years older, what with Tormod living and growing more slowly than purebred humans. Tormod knew how to use a mirror, he was quite well aware that he still looked like 14. So his roommate's surprise was no surprise.

"Hi, my name is Tormod Øygaard. I am a first year student here, I suppose you are too?"

"Yeah. You look ... young to be a student here."

"Right? I have a genetic condition that makes me live more slowly, basically. So I'm still a growing boy."

"Still, you got to have grades to get in here, right?"

"Yeah. My mother taught me to study while I was still small."

"So are you religious?"

"Not exactly. I mean, I believe there are things humans can't understand, and there are powers beyond this world, but I try to not get too involved with them before I have to."

"Me neither. My mom and dad are both religious, and they think living on the school is going to convert me. I just want a top education so I can get a good job and earn lots of money."

"Don't you feel bad being separated from all your old friends? I guess they still go to high school where you lived."

"Well, uh, I did not really have a lot of friends."

"Me neither! Let us continue that way!"

The boarding school was indeed religious still, but not oppressively so. There was a very short sermon and prayer by a teacher in connection with breakfast, which was in a common dining hall. If you preferred to sleep in, you could, but you would not get any food until dinner. You were suppose to make your lunch from the breakfast buffet, there was no warm lunch served. There were no eateries or groceries within walking or realistic biking distance, as the school was kind of in the final outskirts of a residential area. There were no vending machines either. The truly dedicated night owl could stock up on snacks during free time after the school day, when they could walk to the bus stop and take a bus to the nearest town. It was not forbidden to keep snacks in the room, only illegal drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

For the faithful, there were religious services some evenings. Evidently a number of the students were already religious and sympathizers with the particular sect running the school, or at least they thought so, being young enough to still be influenced by their parents. The number of converts, not born into the faith, seemed pretty small. And most of the students had no interest in religion whatsoever. They were there for the education, or because their parents insisted. The latter included a few cases of kids who had been in various degrees of trouble: Girl / boy trouble, insubordination, or in a very

few cases trouble with the law. You'd think kids of that sort did not have the grades to get into a super prestigious economics high school -- and you would be right. Generous financial donations from sect members could be accepted in place of grades, as it turned out.

Perhaps in light of this, Tormod's roommate was understandably a little disturbed when he learned that the harmless-looking little kid in the lower bunk had sent a boy to the hospital for a few weeks. "He's probably out by now" Tormod said optimistically. "Anyway, he deserved it. He was a creep. He was groping the girl I was with. He's not going to do that again anytime soon. His mother is taking him with her to live somewhere else. I don't see why I had to be sent away too. I'd be fine. I have become a lot better at defending myself since then. I did not even know karate back then!"

The next day Tormod was politely asked by the headmaster to move to one of the few single rooms in the boys' dormitory. He did not display any of the intense joy he felt inside.

Perhaps he had gone to bed too early? Tormod did not fall asleep as quickly as usual. He laid there, sensing the even flows of electricity around him. It was as if he had grown steadily more aware of it over the course of the summer. Now, with closed eyes he could even follow the trickle of electricity from the charger to his smartphone, which he had wisely placed out of reach. It was going to be his alarm clock in the morning. Not that he absolutely needed that, because music would start blaring in the loudspeakers well in time for everyone to be up and ready for breakfast. Although some people somehow managed to sleep through it. Just in case, he had the smartphone. But not in bed. First, it was not safe: There were stories on the Net about people having PComs in bed and then they caught fire. And second, once he started playing around with the apps or on the net, time would just fly, and he would not get any sleep for a while.

Even now that it was "off", the smartphone was not quiet. The display was powered off, and it would not have responded to touchscreen presses, but there were still trickles of electricity running around inside it. There was a kind of master loop that ran continuously, although it used very little power. It was probably scanning for interrupts, such as from the power button or an incoming call or text message, and checking the time against alarms and scheduled events like looking for mail or notifications from gBook. Because occasionally some other little trickle would wake up and do something, then fall back to sleep. He was surprised that he could feel it in such detail even from more than a meter away.

He knew that he could sense this electric activity like a barely noticeable static when he was operating the smartphone, but he generally ignored it. The electricity in there was the tiniest fraction of the power that bathed the room from the cables in the walls, but now that he did not have anything else to do, he found himself "listening" to it, as if he was just on the verge of understanding it. In fact...

The feeling of "reaching" into something else. Wizardry! And then suddenly he was "in" the smartphone. The screen was still off, but he could sense the impulses and see what they were doing. He could change the flow just slightly, recreating the patterns his

subconscious had picked up for months while he was unaware of it. Now he could somehow use them to emulate touches on the screen. And he could read the feedback as if it was being sent to the screen. What kind of wizardry was this? He could not feel his body! He was controlling the smartphone, but he was not controlling himself!

With a long gasp for breath, Tormod was back in his body. He seemed to have suffered no ill effects, but what in the world had just happened? He knew that he had somehow taken control of the smartphone, to the point that he had been able to see exactly which processes were running at the time and what they were doing. But it had required such concentration that he had been unable to do anything else. Evidently his heart had continued beating though, and he had continued breathing. He was not actually out of breath as he had thought for a moment. His body had maintained itself, he had just not been aware of his surroundings. But even with an IQ of 150 - that was what the Interweb test said - could he really interpret the tiny movements of electricity in a microprocessor? Or had he just imagined it? Was it wizardry? Did wizardry actually work with microprocessors? He was pretty sure that in fantasy novels, magic made electronics unreliable. Did the demigods wizards of his father's alternate world use electronics and control it telepathically, or was it some kind of random side effect? He was not sure. But he was sure he was not going to sleep for a while.

It hadn't been a dream. Somehow Tormod had learned to interpret the tiny electrical signals in computer parts, but it required total concentration, something he could hardly allow himself in everyday life. But he really did seem to have an affinity for all things electrical. Not a particularly useful wizard power to have, perhaps, but perhaps it would come in handy one day. Hopefully not by electrocuting someone ... He already had enough trouble because of the fire spell!

Luckily he seemed able to handle computers just fine with a keyboard and mouse as well. As a high school specializing toward economics and commerce, computer use was going to be even more important than in an ordinary high school. In fact, they not only were to use computers every day, they even got one to have in their room. And since Tormod had his room to himself, he got one for himself! He had used his mother's computer since ... Well, since she got one at home, probably. He could not remember exactly. But since she was also using it, and since she did not want him to spend all his time playing computer games and such, he did not get to use it as much as he wanted. Now he was encouraged to develop his computer skills. They even had a computer programming class, although it was only two hours a week. That was not going to take them very far with such a complex topic!

Of course, with a computer in his room, and the textbook, he could easily learn it by himself. Their teacher seemed competent enough, but with a book, he could study at his own speed and not that of the rest of his class. Perhaps that online IQ test exaggerated his abilities, but he was definitely well above average now. If anyone could do this, he could.

Except he had other interests too. He would research all kinds of reports about paranormal powers, and myths and legends that seemed to have any similarity to him

and his father. And there was no shortage of such material on the Interweb. Rather, there was just too much of it. And most of it was woo-woo superstition at best, he was pretty sure of that: It just did not gel. There was no coherence to it. After a couple weeks, he came to an odd and disconcerting conclusion: Myths was probably the best source. The more some website pretended to be scientific, invoking quantum physics and supersymmetry, the less useful it was. These people - and they were usually individuals or small group - tried to explain psychic phenomena with their personal pet theories; so they would twist facts to fit, discard parts that did not fit, and (he suspected) occasionally make up stuff to fit their ideas.

In contrast, myths and legends were based on observation, although they were distorted by hundreds or - in some cases - thousands of years. They were also observations by people who lacked modern scientific understanding. But for the same reason, these people told what they thought they had seen, not what they thought would be possible or explainable. They did not try to make what they saw fit their theories, except the very vague theories that were their religions. And since they had no idea how much was impossible, they might notice something that a modern observer would filter out or change.

Gods, demigods, heroes, saints and sages through the ages had displayed a wide range of psychic powers. Some of them were like stronger versions of his own tiny little tricks. A couple more were powers his mother had specifically said his father had: Flying, going through walls, making himself invisible or looking different. And some were completely unfamiliar, like speaking to people far away, appearing in two or more places at once, talking with the dead or even visiting the ghost realm and returning. He had no idea how much of this was fact, how much was fiction and how much was misunderstanding. But he was determined to improve his own "myth-understanding" so he could be prepared for whatever might come -- and perhaps one day know the truth about his own origin and heritage.

Finally he was ready to bring up his theory - very cautiously - with his mother. While talking with her one evening, he brought up his topic of research. "I know this sounds crazy, and it is probably way off. But I've read a lot of mythology lately, and I can't shake the feeling that some of the gods and heroes of old tales have a bit in common with me. So, do you possibly think that my dad could be, you know, something similar?"

"Well of course. Not something similar, but one of them. And I even think I know who."

Chapter 10: Baah baah black sheep

"Mom, are you serious? My dad is someone from Earth mythology?"

"Well, perhaps. But it is a bit more complicated than that."

"How is that complicated? Who is it?"

"I decided when you were itty bitty to not tell you. You have your own life to live, not the shadow of your dad. Even if I told you his name, you would not really know him. He is the man, not the myth."

"But I have the right to know who my father is!"

"That's why I have told you about him since you were little. Telling you his name - or the name he is known by in Earth mythology - would cause you know him less, since he is not really that person."

"But..."

"First, it could be a hereditary title, although I am sure he is at least several centuries old. Not as in old and frail, but as in, he has grown in power and wisdom for a very long time. You don't just achieve this kind of mental stature in your youth, no matter how smart. And by youth I mean a century or two. That is why I say if you survive to grow up, you will have all the time in the world. I believe at some point you may completely stop ageing. You will probably still be vulnerable to a nuclear bomb for a while, stuff like that, but in practice you should become an immortal by human standards -- a demigod, like your father."

"Demigod, well, I suppose that is a clue."

"Sort of. He is obviously not the Creator of the Universe, but he is a being people in older times might worship as a god."

"Might ... so are you saying they didn't?"

"No, I'm not saying that. But perhaps what they worshiped was not the real him but something he did that may not have been the most representative of his personality or even of his power. It just so happened to strike people with awe at that time."

"That is a pretty wide net."

"This is not a guessing game. I want you to understand that your dad was not a myth, but a man, albeit a man with powers far beyond ordinary mortals. And there's one thing more."

"What thing?"

"There are innumerable Earths, some of them with very similar history. Your dad could not even say for sure whether he had been on this particular Earth before, if so it had changed beyond recognition. Maybe he had been on some alternate Earth, and some alternate version of him had been here!"

"That is seriously weird."

"It is scary how easily history hinges on some small, seemingly insignificant detail. If Grace Hopper had not become America's first female president, would America still have gone on to become the world leader in computer technology? If not, we Norwegians

might been speaking Russian now!"

Over the next days, Tormod repeatedly tried to get his mother to reveal the name of his father, but she just laughed when he mentioned one name or another. "It is not a guessing game" she told him time and again.

His first thought, of course, was based on his name and nationality as well as his affinity for electricity. But Thor did not have any of the powers his mother had described for his father, and she had said nothing about electricity; that was something he had discovered on his own. Besides, being able to detect the electricity in cables and computers was not quite the same as creating lightning bolts! To make things worse, Thor was super strong but not super intelligent, pretty much the opposite of himself.

So he went back to his spreadsheet. While looking for matches, he realized there was someone he had skipped, and as he filled him in, a sense of dread fell upon him. It matched entirely too well. Wise, benevolent and lovable; a healer and mindreader; able to change his appearance, defy gravity and even warp through walls. For good measure, he had actually left Earth but promised to return. There was just one thing that did not fit, but that one thing was enough.

There was no way Jesus Christ would bang Tormod's mom and then zip off to the next galaxy. No. No. Just no. He was not going to even ask. "Blessed are the pure in heart..."

That left Zeus as the best candidate so far. He was a charming fellow and totally into the ladies, but also had the best interest of the humans in mind. He had a connection to electricity, he was smart, and he seemed to have a pretty varied toolbag of powers depending on what needed to be done, unlike the lesser gods of his pantheon that were more one-trick ponies. He could definitely change his appearance, to the point of camouflaging himself as an animal without being suspected.

But his mother still just laughed. "Give it up! It is enough for you to know that he was the kind of magical superman that would have been mistaken for a god in a more primitive age. And from what he said, you were going to be one too. But I had to protect you until you could protect us all, and that's what I've been doing, even when it hurts. And believe me, being separated from you at your age hurts more than you can imagine. Every day I worry if you are safe, then tell myself that at least you are safer than here."

"I'm fine, mom. I haven't been in a single fight, much less set anyone on fire."

Well, a month and a half was perhaps a bit early to be proud of that.

As the weeks passed by, the new students naturally sorted themselves into four cliques on the school. In addition to jocks and nerds, there were also the believers and the strivers. The strivers were a little familiar, as they were similar to the two geniuses in Tormod's middle school class. They were obsessed with good grades, and they got them, through a combination of high intelligence and hard work. But while the nerds were driven by the need to know and to understand, the strivers considered knowledge a tool, if not a necessary evil, in their quest for riches, status and power. Despite their

shared high IQ, the strivers and nerds rather disliked each other, albeit in a cold and aloof way. Strivers were arguably the largest single group on the school, because of its high reputation and high requirements. They did not quite make up an absolute majority though.

The least familiar group was the believers. They had embraced - or at least cheerfully accepted - the school's religious tenets and its draconian policy on alcohol, tobacco, pornography and premarital hanky-panky, either of which could in theory get you expelled permanently. Being accepted and supported by the teachers and "dorm parents", they tended to act like they owned the place. They also made up a modest majority of the "quota", the students who did not qualify in grades but were allowed due to generous donations from their parents. The rest of the quota was the black sheep, which here was pretty much identical with the jocks. They were kids, almost exclusively boys, who were sent away from home because they had gotten into trouble, or "bad company" as it was called here. The idea was that being separated from their bad company and immersed in a religious culture, they would change their ways. This was known to have happened in the past, and the examples were retold frequently, but there seems to be very few examples to choose from. Tormod was not surprised.

Tormod was, on the other hand, not quite a natural part of any of these groups. His sympathy was mostly with the nerds, which were quite few in number. They in turn were wary of him, because he were perfect in class like the strivers, and was rumored to have been sent away from home after landing a boy in hospital, like the black sheep. Now the strivers and the black sheeps were mutual enemies - in fact, the black sheep were basically the enemy of everyone including the teachers - and so Tormod fell between three chairs and far way off the fourth. It is kind of hard to be a true believer when you are the son of a demigod from a parallel world.

Being unique and alone, he found himself once again the obvious target of the troublemakers, the very thing he had come here to avoid.

"Hey Green Eyes" said Big Boy. He was so called because he was, indeed, the biggest boy not only in first grade but in the whole school. As such, he was the natural leader of the new Sheep, which made up quite a bit of the total Sheep population ... They were not the most likely to stay in the school, what with their usually bad grades and tendency to break rules. But they were a good source of income, as hopeful parents paid to have them under the white wings of the religious school as long as possible. There were rumors of parents paying extra to get their kids back in after they were kicked out for having alcohol or tobacco in their dorm rooms.

"Hey big guy" said Tormod, showing unnecessary respect by not using the word "boy". He could see what way this was going, so he better make sure he came out of it with his halo shining.

"I hear you came here because you sent a boy to the hospital" said Big Boy.

"Actually I qualify because of my grades. But yeah, I did send a big boy to the hospital. It was necessary, he messed with a girl I liked." Tormod tried to sound casual.

"I hear he had three other guys to back him up."

"Well, actually they were in the front and he was in the back, not that it helped him in the end."

"How about you demonstrate for us? I happen to have these three guys around." He waved, and three of the other Black Sheep came trudging.

"Well, don't blame me if this ends badly for you guys." Tormod took a defensive but provocative stance that he had picked up from his half-cousin.

"Let's get this party started!" shouted Big Boy. Two of the boys advanced side by side, a third following them, and the leader standing in back, possibly because Tormod had mentioned it. That was certainly what he was hoping for when he said it.

Breathe. Be conscious. Observe. Body language is 90% of communication even in everyday life. In a fight, it is 110%.

The two were advancing together, but they were not properly coordinated. They were just comrades attacking together, not teammates operating as two fists of the same body. He could make use of that easily. He just had to move sideways forward. The sideways movement would put one of them in front of the other, while the forward movement would provoke an attack.

Bingo. May all my enemies be as predictable as these.

The boy lashed out.

Strength is nothing. Agility and speed are more. But awareness is what wins a fight.

The boy was acting on habit, unaware that his stance gave him away long before he even began the strike. Tormod followed it backward while moving to the side until the arm moved past him, then grabbed it and pulled the boy off balance. He twisted him sideways while tripping him, so the forward of the attacker sent him literally rolling several times. In the meantime Tormod moved on to the next, pulled him along and threw him up in the air to land on his comrade.

The third boy tried to grapple him. "I'm sorry, comrade" Tormod said. He already saw what was going to happen, and he wished there was a better way. But as far as he could see, this was the only way that did not expose him to an unreasonable risk. He had his mother to think about, after all. He slipped below the boy, flipped him around and used the boy's momentum to make him sit down hard on the ground. Next: Big Boy!

Big Boy swung hard and fast, but not fast enough. It might have been fast enough if his body language had not given him away more than a second in advance, plenty enough time for Tormod to make a complete battle plan. This boy had been fighting since the sandbox. He had exactly the ingrained fighting habits from early childhood that Mr Hartmann had been so delighted to not find when training Tormod. Once these were in place and you forgot about them, you would signal your every move like a traffic light. Tormod slipped away backward, and Big Boy followed. The other boy should be getting to his feet about now. Tormod paused long enough for his attacker to gather his strength in a truly impressive punch that would have ended the fight once and for all. Actually, it did. Tormod slid to the side just in time, grabbed the arm and added his own lesser strength to the momentum, while pushing down. The boy coming up behind him had time to turn sideways, but no more than that before the full strength and weight of Big Boy hit him, focused in his white knuckles.

Tormod was not sure whether he could actually hear the rib crack, or whether it was

his healer sense, or even his X-ray vision - he was close enough that it just might have happened. It was a very unpleasant sensation even to witness. It had to be a lot more unpleasant to experience firsthand.

The two first boys were coming up to join the fight again, just in time to see their would-be leader miss Tormod and hit his friend with a devastating blow that left the other curled up on the ground moaning in pain.

"What are you doing? You were the one who were supposed to go to the hospital, not your friend. You are messing with the script."

"YOU did this! YOU!"

"Yes, because I totally have the strength to crack a guy's ribs with a single blow. Unlike you. Tell that to the teachers. Because I think you should go get a teacher now, so they can get your friend here to the hospital."

"I don't like this" said the headmaster. He and Tormod was alone in his office. "You are one of our most promising students, perhaps he best. I don't like hearing that you get involved in fistfights, and especially not fistfights where people get hurt."

"I don't like being involved in fistfights either. Do I look like someone who enjoys fistfights? I was lucky to just barely got out of the way of that fist. You heard what it did to the other boy, who is half agains as muscular as me. Imagine me getting hit by that. I might have died. Imagine the newspapers. Imagine the reaction of the parents. Imagine the school closing down and you becoming jobless and unemployable. Well, your god would probably provide. Or the State, if your god did not find it necessary. But it would not be a pleasant time. Not a pleasant time at all."

"It is pretty bad as it is, but it seems his parents are accepting that it was an accident and won't press charges."

"Someone up there may really be looking out for you! My mom would not leave you with the skin on your backside intact if I went to the hospital, much less the graveyard. I am her only son after all. But don't worry, I'll totally testify that it was an accident. We were playing around and suddenly, WHAM! His fist just happened to crush a nearby ribcage. Terrible accident, absolutely terrible, but boys will be boys."

"Actually as a condition for not pressing charges, we have to expel the other student."

"I sincerely hope I, the intended victim here, is not 'the other student'."

"No, no, of course not. But it still bothers me. You seem to get into trouble very easily."

"Yes, that is true. I always have. I think it is because I am so small and harmless, people think they can attack me without fear of anything happening to them - only to me. That is not really an attitude I like to encourage, but it seems to come naturally to certain people."

"Well, I just hoped that you would try to avoid unnecessary confrontations in the future."

"If it were up to me, I would avoid crazy bloodthirsty bullies completely, not even going to the same school as them. Actually, that was why my mom sent me here! But

evidently this not such a school. That will definitely disappoint her if she hears of this ... and everyone she shares this unfortunate story with."

Chapter 11: Head to headmaster

"Visiting hours." It sounded like something from a hospital, or perhaps a prison. And the Commercial High School was a little similar to those, perhaps. But here, it meant the hours from the after-school dinner meal till evening bell, the approximately two hours - two and a half if you hurried - when boys could visit girls or (rather less commonly) the other way around. During the first weeks there was little of this among the first years, as they did not know each other that well. But it did not take long until the first visits began, and now in November the boys' hall was remarkably peaceful at this time of the day. Between visiting girls and going to the town, there were mostly the strivers left, already hard at work with their homework. And in a room of his own, Tormod was testing his powers. Time jump was up to one minute now, but far from reliable. It had not saved him from Big Boy, after all. But if he was to avoid getting involved in more fights, he might need to resort to wizardry, and this would still be his best option. When it worked.

Tormod would be happy to see all the Black / Lost Sheep sent home or to the hospital, but the school probably less so. Parents of the Sheep were willing to pay a great deal, more so than the parents of the Faithful usually, to have their sons stay on the academy grounds. If the school developed a reputation for sending them back, that cash source would dry up. Cash was necessary to hire top notch teachers, and the whole school's existence depended on that in this age when religion was distinctly a minority thing in Norway. It was all connected, and Tormod could see those connections. Did not mean he had to like them, though.

He was disturbed by a slight sensation before he heard the sounds. Someone was outside his door with an electric gadget, a phone of a different type from his. The circuits were subtly different. No, there were more than one. And then there was a knock on the door. His first thought was that they had finally ganged up on him, but all rooms had panic buttons after an unfortunate episode some years ago. They would have to be already resigned to expulsion if they came to beat him up in his room, although he did lack the room for maneuver. Automatically he scanned the room for the best defensive locations, in case time jump failed to work again. Then he threw the door open. Three girls stood outside. They looked a bit startled and very, very harmless. Especially the one holding a cake.

"You three?" he said, because he kind of knew them from class. Interpersonal things were not his strength, having grown up rather isolated, but he still observed everything that happened around him. So he probably knew them better than they knew him.

"May we come inside?"

"Sure. But what are you doing here? This is my room. I live here alone."

"That sure is convenient" said Cake Girl, and they all swarmed inside. Unni. Her name was Unni. "We wanted to say thank you."

"For...? Did someone give you a copy of my notes?" He had lent his notes to a couple

struggling nerds who had been too distracted by their daydreams during class. Actually he made his notes after class as a summary, he did not actually write during class, but they were considered very good notes even so.

"Nah, we mean thank you for getting rid of those creeps. They were always creeping and being icky and stuff and not letting us girls alone."

"Although there were a couple girls who liked them, but they acted like every girl should be happy to have them being creepy around them. Flirting in icky ways and stuff."

"Well, I can't say that is absolute news to me, but I was just trying to save my own skin. I did not do it for you, because I don't really know what girls like and dislike. It seems to vary from girl to girl and from time to time."

The girls looked at each other and giggled.

"Yes it does" said Unni, having placed the cake on the table. One of the others had brought disposable cutlery and plates. How they had gotten hold of the cake he had no idea. Probably not made it, but who knows. They probably were capable of it, if they got to borrow the kitchen. Most likely store-bought, though. It looked professional enough.

"We three" said Unni, evidently their designated spokesperson, "don't like big dumb guys who act like we owe them something just for them being boys. We like smart guys who act all surprised when someone is nice to them."

"I guess that kind of girl may exist" he conceded. She looked at the others and they giggled again. Could they really coordinate that? He thought giggling was like laughter, only less so. If you did not feel like it, it just didn't happen.

"Have you never had a girlfriend?" asked Unni further. The others continued giggling in the background.

"I had a friend who was a girl" he said. "A big, dumb boy broke in and touched her in places she did not like him to, so we sent him to the hospital. I am sorry, but I am not quite as cute and harmless as I look."

"Oh, we know. You said you *had* a friend? So she is not your friend anymore?"

"My mom sent me away . And her mom told her not to call me. They blamed me for getting her in trouble in the first place. And they were right. The boy wanted to provoke me. He would probably not have cared much about her one way or another if she wasn't with me."

"So, you and that girl ...?"

"We were in the same club. And her twin brother too."

"So you weren't, like, going out?"

"No. I don't go out much."

"Unni, we shouldn't just let the cake stand there."

"Right. Dear Jesus, bless this food. Amen."

Zeus thought *Tormod*. *It's got to be Zeus. I definitely don't have the power to bless cakes.*

Hanging out with the girls had been OK. They had just been eating cake and talking about random things. It was fun and relaxing, and he was starting to think that he was

making a mistake not having any female friends. They were also quite different from Birgitte "I want to be a slut when I grow up" half-cousin. Girls really came in many different types.

But there were no girls around now. In P.E, boys and girls were strictly separated. This made sense, given the religion's fear of all things sexual. Tormod was of course also afraid of sex, but for different reasons. If his magic bypassed ordinary contraceptions, he would leave a trail of easily recognizable babies once he started having sex. That would be a big problem, given that these kids might have superpowers like himself, and he was definitely not ready to guide them through a difficult life. He was still having a difficult life himself!

P.E was luckily not quite the torment it had used to be. He was above average in pretty much everything now, although not much above. It seems his mother had been right about him just needing to grow up. Most boys had stopped growing by now, but he was still growing, just very slowly. His arms were a little more muscular than last year, he could do more pushups, he could run faster, he could hit a ball better. And, evidently, today he could jump a lot higher.

"That's pretty amazing" said Joachim as Tormod stood up from a height jump. Joachim was a striver, but a natural athlete as well. He was the kind of guy girls looked at with stars in their eyes: Strong, smart, good-looking, confident and well-behaved. The dream of most would-be brides, and probably even more would-be mothers-in-law ... Although the exact content of the dreams might vary between the two groups. Tormod was not even entirely sure about that.

Joachim had finally had to give up. His more robust build allowed him only a fourth place. Now the two other competitors had also bitten the dust, or at least sent the bar tumbling into the dust. Only Tormod kept jumping. Another centimeter, and another.

"This is not just high school jumping, man. You are starting to approach the Norwegian record. What are you, a bird?"

"A plane?" quipped Tormod, and then the inexorable logic of the statement took hold. *A superman? Mom told me my dad could fly. If I do that here, there might be trouble. No, there will be trouble. But how do I even know?*

Luckily he stopped safely short of the Norwegian record, let alone world record. But their teacher seemed very sure there had never been anything like it on the school before. That was already worrying enough. Was there a way to figure out whether he was subconsciously using his superpowers, or whether he even had that particular power? *Use your new super intelligence. There's got to be some way.*

Leaving class, his thoughts went back to last week, when the three girls had unexpectedly invaded his private life. They had been talking until near the evening bell, and then they all three had exchanged mail addresses with him. Since they all had phones - iPhones for the girls, a Huangdong Algol phone for him - they were only a few clicks away.

GIRLS! Suddenly the strands met in the web of his head. Girls were obsessed with weight. Well, not all of them, but it was disturbingly common, even in this enlightened time and place. Which meant they knew of a way to measure their weight. Once the classes were over for the day and he could pick up his smartphone again, he fired off a

mail to Unni:

"Do you know where I can find scales on this school? For humans, not for food."

It did not take long.

"You can borrow ours if you come over during visiting hours. We'll totally look the other way if you want to measure your weight without clothes on."

Was it just him or was she twice as bold in writing as she was in talking? Or was this part of the "monthly cycle" thing? It was a week already, after all.

"Would you be willing to leave the room for a minute even? Just this one time in your life?"

"Just kidding! Of course we will be outside guarding the door."

A joke? Well, that made sense. They were not aspiring to be sluts, after all. Jesus did not approve of sluts ... Wait, didn't he? Tormod would have to consult the mythology source books again, but didn't Jesus say somewhere that prostitutes would go into heaven ahead of the religious leaders of his time? Well, clearly that was some time ago, because the school invited religious leaders with some regularity to hold religious meetings for the Faithful and any curious souls, but to the best of his knowledge they had not yet invited any prostitutes.

Unni and her roommate seemed happy to see him, even if it was just to borrow their scales. He did not really need to undress for his experiment, but he did need to be alone, just in case it worked. So he began slowly unbuttoning his shirt. The girls stared, then hurried outside as he continued. He could hear them tittering and giggling outside as he rapidly removed his shirt and jeans. He did not even need to do that, but they might have sharp ears. This should be enough. He doubted even girls took off their underwear and socks.

68 kg. That was definitely more than last year, although it was not a normal adult male weight. Then again he had not reached his full height either, he sincerely hoped, although it was running ahead of his weight a bit. Now for the tricky part. He stretched upward, reaching out. *Up, up and away!*

The familiar tingle. Had it been there when he was jumping? He could not remember, he had been so engrossed in making it the best jump he could. So he might have used wizardry subconsciously. This time, he used it very consciously, lifting himself as best he could.

38 kg? He had almost halved his weight?? Well, 44% off, but still! No wonder he was close to the Norwegian adult record for high jumps! He might even have crossed it, if he had consciously used his wizardry to his full power. If not for the running commentary of his half-friend Joachim, he might easily have broken records that should not be broken, and become an overnight sensation. That would have been very troublesome. Then again, he was already getting people expelled and hospitalized; he wondered how long he could stay on this school anyway.

Well, hopefully long enough to get his clothes back on before the dorm mother came to check up on them, as she was known to do with alarming regularity during visiting hours. Tittering girls standing outside was not going to be a signal to pass by. And finding an almost naked boy inside would ... Well, that would definitely bring an end to his commercial high school studies. He dressed faster than he could ever remember to have

done before.

Tormod found himself not being bothered anymore; it was a strange feeling after years of being bullied relentlessly. But the wolves in Black Sheep clothing had found him too dangerous to mess with, a shepherd rather than a sheep. They hated and feared him, but from a safe distance, and the rumors they tried to spread about him were proof of his good character to anyone outside their little isolated clique.

The Strivers, the would-be CEOs and financial consultants of the near future, respected him for his elite grades and perfect health as well as for his efficient and ruthless dealing with the Black Sheep. If he had more ambition, they might even have accepted him as one of their own.

The Nerds admired his 1337 coding skillz, his boundless knowledge of the most esoteric trivia, and his acceptance of their obscure and sometimes embarrassing hobbies. He would often watch an anime with them while simultaneously perusing some book on ancient mythology.

The Believers suspected that he was going to Hell for not having invited the Lord and Savior into his heart, but at least in this life he was an ally of sorts, protecting the weak, educating the struggling, and being a gentleman toward the ladies. He also seemed to have recently memorized a complete list of every miracle in the Bible and from even the lesser known saints of church history.

Life was good. Perhaps it would continue that way forever. Yeah, right.

It started innocently enough - well, for certain values of innocent - when he was watching anime with the part of the small geek population, and one of them said to him:

"I hear you got some action over at the girls' dorm the other week."

"I think you may have misheard, unless your idea of action is very different from mine."

"Does your idea of action have something to do with nudity?"

"Well, that is one sort of action. Oh no. Please don't tell me that there are rumors about me getting undressed in Unni's room."

"Is that her name? Is she hot?"

"Ask Johan, we are in the same class."

"Hmm, she's pretty hot I guess. More the classic beauty than the big boobs birthing hips sexy, but not something I'd say no to."

"Show a little respect, won't you?"

"What? You told him to ask me."

"Anyway, whatever action you think took place is probably not the action that did take place. I simply went over to borrow their bathroom scales, which they had in the room instead of in the girls' bathroom. Perhaps each room has its own, or perhaps they considered that I should not go into the girls' bathroom. So I used their scales, and I took off a couple textiles in the process, so as to get a more correct estimate of my weight. 68 kg by the way, which I am pretty happy with. At no point was I completely naked. At no point were any of the girls more naked than usual. It was all an extremely boring episode. I don't think the word 'action' applies except in a purely grammatical sense."

"That's not the version I have heard."

"Then the version you have heard is wrong. And my guess would be that your version has made the rounds in the local rumor-mongering community for a while before getting to you."

"I had hoped you would stay out of trouble" said the headmaster.

"Me too!" said Tormod. "But I have to say that getting called in here out of the blue is quite troublesome. Especially since I was seen on the way in. People might think I had done something worth reprimanding or something."

"Are you saying you haven't?"

"In my lifetime? That would be too grand a claim. But here? Anything that would require your attention? I seriously doubt that."

"That's not what I hear. In fact, I have been alerted to what could be a quite grave problem. Are you familiar with Unni Nilsen?"

"Yes, we are classmates. She has also visited me once, with two other girls. And once I visited her, to borrow something. At that point she was together with one other girl, who I believe is her roommate, who was present the whole time."

"That is not what I hear."

"But I, on the other hand, was actually there, so I know. The difference between experience and hearsay is like the difference between waking life and dream. I guess you have picked up the absurd rumors that seem to be circulating among my overly imaginative friends, about excessive nudity during visiting hours?"

"Now that you mention it yourself, exactly such an episode has been reported to me. Are you denying it?"

"Of course. I even bothered to tell you what actually happened."

"So why do you think this was reported to me?"

"I would guess someone doesn't like me. Probably because of envy. Envy is heavier than sand, you know."

"So you are saying this is smoke without fire?"

"Hmm, what would you call fire? I think I know the origin of this bizarre rumor."

"Please enlighten me."

"That might be difficult, but here is what happened. While I was visiting Unni, I opened the two uppermost buttons on my shirt. This caused the girls to begin giggling. I don't think my body is that amusing, but if you want, I can open the buttons so you can see for yourself."

"Please don't."

"So I would guess they mentioned this to someone, and then someone increased the number of buttons to three, and then four, and it proceeded from there. That's the way humans relate to reality, isn't it? They think their words are so powerful that they can alter reality itself, if they just do it bit by bit. That's pretty conceited, if you ask me. But I suspect you don't, being a human yourself."

"So are you saying you are not a human? What do you think you are, then?"

"If you are willing to shake my hand, I will try to let you find out."

"You are not pretending to be some kind of robot, are you?"

"Find out for yourself."

The headmaster hesitated, but perhaps he saw the boy's smile as a smirk, which it may actually have looked a bit like. He took his hand and gripped it firmly, even hard.

My mother was a human, my father an immensely powerful wizard from another world. My mother called him a demigod, my grandmother called him a demon. I believe you may know him by the name ... Zeus.

The headmaster's eyes bulged and he let go of the hand as if burned. "What did you **do** to me?"

"Did I do something? Or have your sanity finally unraveled? Perhaps we are both insane. But I am just a schoolboy, I don't have much to lose. You, on the other hand, have so much: A prestigious job, a generous income, a great reputation, the love and respect of family and friends. I, in contrast, have lost almost everything, thanks to people who let envy into their hearts and embrace it, like you do toward me. But I still have my life and my mind. And as I try to find my way through the ordinary world, I will learn to survive. Do what you need to do, Mr headmaster. You have the power here. But beware that your school lives and dies by its reputation. I am not a sheep."

Tormod did not ask his leave, he just left.

Chapter 12: Off the scales

November turned into December, and Tormod did not hear anything more from the headmaster. He did however get a mail from Unni, who was somewhat upset. The dorm mother had taken her aside and tried to make her admit to some unspecified indecent behavior with Tormod, which Tormod supposedly had already admitted. She was pretty angry, so he gave a full account of the verbal interactions between him and the headmaster. Whether she believed this or not, or whether she even read it, he did not know. His special relationship with smartphones did not reach quite that far!

Perhaps being the target of envy was a natural consequence of being the best in almost everything. But when you have an IQ of 150 and the study habits of an IQ of 90, it is not really that hard to get ahead. It is harder not to. Perhaps he should have held back, but he did not receive any mercy during the years when he was lagging behind either. Might as well join the Strivers. At least they were used to envy, and while they suffered the pangs of envy themselves, they did not think much of it when it came from lesser men, the future workers rather than the future bosses like themselves.

The midterm exams were approaching, and the Strivers were busy preparing for them. Tormod not so much, since he already felt he had a pretty good grip on everything they were likely to be tested in. He did not expect any trouble with the teacher-set grades either, despite the headmaster: The teachers who actually had him in class respected him for his academic accomplishments. Or athletic accomplishments, in the case of P.E. His speed seemed to be having a growth spurt again.

He did not so much feel the speed increase directly. It was more like everyone else was slowing down. There was so much time to see things coming and prepare for them. It was as if time itself was slowly expanding, like space in the outer universe. In his personal universe, time was stretching. His mind was already racing ahead of all others; now his body was starting to catch up; he was no longer trapped in a body that was much too slow for him. Only the rest of the world stayed as slow as ever. Well, it was not like he was Kid Flash or anything, but he could not avoid noticing how slowly other players reacted to a ball, or how slowly other students reacted to something their teachers said in class.

It is said that time is the only truly fair thing in the universe: Everyone has 24 hours a day. But that is just not true. Because to Tormod now, those hours were as good as 30. He could just get so much more accomplished. He was already thinking faster; now he was reading faster, typing faster, walking faster. While perhaps not a wizard power, it was too remarkable to be simply part of growing up. He was almost certainly experiencing some kind of "demigod" effect. Or "demon", if his grandmother and headmaster were right. He suspected they were not. He had his dark inclinations for sure, but then you would if you had been beaten, kicked, shoved, spat on and ridiculed from first grade to the last year of middle school, and even after that still being attacked, envied and mistrusted.

"Oh, my baby, I've missed you so much!" Tormod's mother was holding him close for a ridiculous length of time.

"I've missed you too, but I guess you get used to it."

"I wonder if I ever will. I know you have your own life to live, but you are my heart and the meaning of my life."

"Mom, I know you love me, but ... You have your own life to live too. You are not simply a supporting cast for me."

"I am. And I am happy to be. One day you will guide this world through the coming storm. If I am alive to see it, I will take pride in you. But if I must depart before that time, I want to do so knowing that I did my best."

"No one could make a better mom than you." He smiled. "Also, no one can make better food, as far as I am concerned. I have lived on school buffets and the occasional snack for half a year. I demand that my loyal servant make the food I am used to!"

"Aye aye Sir!"

It was good to be home. His mother insisted that he had grown, and he probably had; it was almost half a year, after all. Well, four months. But he had only been home a week between this and summer vacation, so if you counted the time from he really lived at home, it was half a year and then some.

"How did the exams go?" his mother asked over dinner.

"Pretty well, I think. We haven't gotten them back yet, of course, but I wasn't really in doubt about anything important. I don't have photographic memory - I can't look at a book page with a single glance and read it later - but once I have read something, I can very nearly quote it. And I am pretty good at keeping track of where it is, too."

"That is great. I think you may be smarter than me now, although I still have a lot more life experience. Speaking of which, have you gotten involved with any girls? You tell me no on the phone, but I want to look at your eyes when you answer."

"I had a female friend, briefly. Nothing romantic. She thanked me for getting a bully to reveal himself so he was expelled. Brought me cake. Let me borrow her scales. But then people started making some pretty hot rumors about us - as I told you about - and she probably believed I had started those rumors or at least supported them. So that was our friendship."

"Well, you told me about it, but it is easier to put a little spin on it when on the phone, don't you think?"

"Mom, I don't do that. I think I am not quite human anymore. I am starting to think differently. I still love you, but it is harder for people to reach me, for better or for worse. The distance between my classmates and me - or even the teachers and me - is just growing and growing. This month has been particularly bad. Something is happening to me. It is like time itself is expanding. All of time. The days, the hours, the minutes. Even the space between each breath and each heartbeat is getting longer. People say that I am moving faster, but to me it feels like everyone and everything else is slowing down. It is not to a supernatural degree yet, I am sure there are many people who are faster than

me, but this month has been special in that it just kept expanding. Before it I was a little faster than average, now I am the fastest boy in my class, in the whole school I think."

"You'll get used to it. Just like you got used to being the smartest boy in your class."

"Well, I did, but that was more gradual. And people are envying me even for that. If they found out that I am faster than them in other ways too, they would envy me even more. I could jump higher than anyone in school, so they stopped having high jump as part of P.E. Not sure, but I think it is the headmaster. He dislikes me."

"Well, as you said, you are threatening their Lost Sheep business. It is his livelihood."

"If he is living off Sheep, does that not make him a wolf?"

"There are a lot of wolves in the world."

"But I am supposed to be a shepherd. I don't think I would make a good shepherd."

"I can't think of any better in this world today."

"But you are my mom. You are not exactly objective."

"Speaking of which, our objective for tomorrow is to find a great Christmas tree."

"That is not speaking of which, that is a pun!"

"Mom, before I go back to school, I want to use the bathroom scales. Evidently borrowing one at school is the Root of All Evil."

"Sure, you don't need to ask. You are at home, and you will always be at home wherever I live."

"Your mother does not seem to agree."

"Do you think you could heal her now?"

"Probably not unless you manage to hold her down. I haven't really had any opportunities to practice my healing, as I am shamelessly healthy and people have stopped kicking and punching me. So healing is probably just as slow and uncertain as it used to be. I may be able to heal her a little, or not at all, I don't really know."

"I don't mind living here, because I have so many years of memories with you here, and it makes me happy to see you everywhere, even though it is bittersweet to know that you are far away when I just thought I saw you coming down the stairs. But I would not mind leaving either. Your grandma is a selfish crybaby. She always said life would become a paradise once you were gone, but she is still making it a hell. It is her own endless cravings that keeps her unhappy. She wants what she cannot have. Even when you restore her health, and one day you will, she will still hate herself deep inside and try to sabotage herself again."

"It is weird how someone like that can have a daughter like you."

"She was not always like that. Oh, she had a dark streak, but her faith and her husband held them at bay. Then she lost them both, and a part of her died and went to hell. She has never really come back."

Tormod locked himself in the master bathroom, stripped down to the bare essentials, and stepped on the weight. It was up to 70 kg, although one of these was probably going to disappear once he got more distance to Christmas and the excessive amounts of delicious food during the whole Christmas and New Year's week. Now, time to see if he could lighten up a bit, literally.

He felt the wizardry, as easy and natural now as opening a door and walking through it. And then the needle of the old-fashioned bathroom scales fell, and fell, and fell, and fell ...

"FRIGG AND ALL THE NORNS!"

"Are you OK?"

"Just have to get my pants on. You won't believe this!"

"Can you fly?"

"Not quite, but I can reduce my weight to less than 10 kg!"

"I guess it was a good thing they cancelled the high jump competition, eh?"

"Mom, this is incredible!"

"Don't go jumping tall buildings in a single bound yet! You are still very easy to recognize, despite your hair. By the way, your roots are showing again."

"I don't I can jump even low buildings, but I can probably jump off a rooftop without breaking anything."

"Perhaps if you had a cape. Even a 10 kg child can get badly hurt falling from a rooftop. Your larger body has more air resistance, but that is all. If you land badly, you could still get hurt or even die. So be careful. Hopefully sometime this year you will be able to actually fly, but you should still not do so in daylight."

"I am sorry for doubting you! I have traced down the story about us having hot sexytimes in my room. It did not come from you, it came from me, but I did not mean to! I told my best friend about how you had undressed in our room, and she thought it was funny enough to tell her other friends, but somehow she seems to have forgotten the part about us being outside at the time, or nobody heard it. So it kind of took off pretty quick from there. I should not have trusted her, but I thought she was my best friend. I am so upset with her right now! You probably hate me because of this, but I really did not mean this to go all over the place, and I had no idea that she would make it into something it was not! I feel like I deserve a good spanking for starting this, but you can imagine what would become of THAT.

Sorry this got kind of long winded, but I apologize like crazy and hope you stop hating me.

Yours sincerely, Unni."

"I never hated you in the first place. I knew this was a lost feather that had grown into five naked chicks. That's the way it works. People are never going to let something as small as truth get in the way of a good story. What bothered me most about it was that you believed I would have said anything like that. I am not that kind of guy. And I'm not really the kind of guy who spans an innocent girl either, but if it makes you feel better, I will at least give it some thought. :) Although I think perhaps if we meet again, we should do so in a fairly well lit place and with at least two witnesses... If you want to see me again, that is."

They were back on the school grounds. Things had still been awkward, but evidently she had decided to do her own research, and he really appreciated that. It was so common for people to just rely on their prejudices and think that everyone was the

same. If you had been betrayed once, you would create a layer of expectation of betrayal around yourself, so it would not hurt quite as much the next time. He knew, he had layer upon layer of those. That was why he had not been hurt when she thought he was a jerk pretending to have had premarital hanky-panky with her. Well, he had told himself he was not hurt. And he had not shed any tears, so perhaps it had worked. But it must have been harder for her. She had been the one who sought him out in the first place (with a little help from her friends). She was the one whose reputation was hurt by the stories. His aunt was right: The stud / slut thing was still a thing, even in Norway, even in this time. No one except the headmaster had belittled him. It was different for her.

In the end, they met in another girl's room, and she brought cookies as a peace offering, which he accepted instead of spanking. This was probably for the best for all involved. He was not sure why that particular topic even came up, but perhaps she had somehow caught him glancing at her butt. It was not a butt to launch a thousand ships, but it was still a butt and easily recognizable as female, at least. But, no spanking in the end, after all. The cookies were good though. And the whole hanging out together was very nice. When he returned to the boys' dorm, he was so elated he felt like he could fly. It was all he could do to not leap the large courtyard in a single bound.

It was only when he was back in his own room that he found that he could actually, literally fly. Or float under the ceiling at least. It took no more effort than walking, although it felt a hundred times weirder. As long as he kept standing upright with his head touching the ceiling and his feet 25 centimeters above the ground, it just felt eerie. When he pulled his legs up under him, leaving a meter of thin air beneath him, it felt a bit insecure. And when he first tried to float horizontally, he did so only an arm's length above his bed. For a would-be semi-demigod, he sure found himself to be more timid than he had expected. But just because he could fly did not mean he was also invulnerable. It might work for Superman, but that did not mean it worked for him. And to be honest, invulnerability was one power he was in no hurry to test out!

Tormod had called his mother and been all like "I can fly! I can fly!" And she had been all like "Don't let anyone see you, and dress warm because the wind is really cold this time of the year." So that was a bit of an anticlimax.

But he kept practicing in his room for the next days until he had the basics down, on how to move up and down and sideways and how to just hang there and float. He became pretty good at sharp turns (because his room was quite small) and also learned to float horizontally on his stomach and his back without being afraid. He even learned to shift the weight - or weightlessness, in this case - between different parts of the body, so he could "walk on the ceiling" with his head down. Needless to say he had the curtains drawn close. But there were lots of boys who had their curtains drawn together from time to time, so flying was probably not what people thought of.

One thing that he learned was that once he was off the ground, he did not need to make an effort or even concentrate to stay airborne. It was no more difficult than walking or biking: If he was moving, he had to be aware of where he was moving so as to

not run into things, but that was it. He could hang in the air literally for an hour without falling down. At the end of the first week, he could lie in the air reading a book. Taking his mind off the hovering did not cause him to fall down; it seemed he need to make a decision for that to happen, although he did not try falling asleep while hovering. It was anyway too exciting for that yet, but he would not have taken the risk. Perhaps the floating did reduce his concentration a little, so he read more slowly or had a hard time doing complicated math or programming exercises, but once he got into it this was no worse than walking. You can't completely forget the outside world, but you don't need to hold on for your life.

Getting up in the first place was a little harder in the beginning. There were times when it just did not click, but they were fairly few and usually he would be able to take off after a new attempt. If he tried more than that, he just got tired. It was like his other wizard "spells" really, not even the hardest of them. He failed perhaps one time out of ten, and failed completely twice during the first week, when he went up and down like a yo-yo, probably more than 30 times. It was definitely easier than learning to bike had been. Then again he had never had a tricycle, unlike most boys.

After a week of practice in his room, he decided it was time to take to the skies for real.

Chapter 13: A new perspective

It was time. Tormod dressed in his warmest winter clothes, not because his mother had said so but because it was January in Norway and even here by the coast it was cold enough for the snow to stay on the ground. At least it was not deep, something he appreciated as he walked the path down to the seashore. In the first weeks of the school year this had been crowded on sunny afternoons with kids bathing or tanning themselves in the sun. The water had been warm only right by the shore though, if you swam out more than a little bit you could feel the cold of the open sea beyond the bay. Now that it was winter, the ocean air kept the temperature closer to the melting point than elsewhere. Obviously there was no bathing at this time of the year, and no footprints in the snow until he made them. But at least he was not wading in snow to his knees or above.

Wading in snow would not be a problem once he was flying, but he could not do that until he was sure he was out of sight. By the end of the shore was a low cliff. He went over to it, and looked around intently. There was no sign of human presence at all. He wrapped his scarf over his mouth and put on blue skiing goggles. He had never shown this to anyone, and his winter clothes were quite anonymous. Hopefully even if someone should see him from a distance, they would not recognize him. But he did not plan to be seen; it was just an extra caution. He faced the cliffside. "It's time to move!" he said out loud.

There was brief moment of reaching, of tingling as the wizardry took hold. Then he sailed upward along the side of the cliff, and over it. The terrain beyond that was rough and broken and did not invite to walking. Not that Tormod was walking anymore. He stayed about a meter above the ground as he began to move forward as fast as he could do without putting any extra effort into it. The pace was approximately that of a brisk walk. He tried to speed up more, but the difference was rather modest and he tired quickly. So he went back to the easier pace, following the coastline for about a kilometer, which took approximately twelve minutes. This was about as far as he got from the school without getting close to other people. "Up, up and away!"

In his room, the ceiling had been barely 25 centimeters above him, so there had never really been room for any "up and away". Seeing the ground sink below him was strange, dizzying and a bit scary. He stopped just a little higher than the nearest treetops. Looking down, he felt a moment of vertigo. If he fell down now, it was going to hurt. But he had never fallen down any of the times he had been hovering in his room, no matter what position he took. He could even sit on the ceiling with his head down and not fall. So why would he fall here? Did he think there was some kind of invisible barrier above him where a vengeful god would smite down anyone who tried to climb higher? Well, yeah, in the sense that the atmosphere would thin eventually, but that was kilometers further above. Birds were flying all the time. Planes were flying with humans on board. There was no glass ceiling.

Hanging in the air, gradually relaxing, he felt a moment of change. Not like the change when he began a wizard spell. It was a purely mental change, a shift in viewpoint. He felt like he was swimming in air rather than flying. His goggles were a diving mask, the ground below was the bottom of the sea. He was as weightless as when he was drifting in water. The only difference was that he could breathe this water, and it did not resist his movement as much. It held him aloft easily enough though. He willed himself upward, and the ground fell away below him. Interestingly, it seemed that his upward speed was very nearly the same as his horizontal speed had been, as if gravity was not really a concern. It was hard to estimate vertical speed, especially as things grew smaller below him, so perhaps he overestimated it. It seemed unlikely that gravity would simply make an exception for him. And the feeling of speed quickly faded as he came higher and the change in perspective from one breath to the next dwindled until it was hard to say whether he was still moving, except for the movement of air against his nose, pretty much the only exposed part of him.

He looked around, and there, to the west - northwest, he could see the school buildings. They looked small, and it was unlikely that anyone would notice him from a distance of over a kilometer. But even so, the sight somehow disturbed him. He stopped ascending, and looked around in all directions. He was tempted to pull out his smartphone and take pictures, but if anyone ever saw them, there would be a problem. And if not, there wasn't much point in having them, as he was anyway going to remember this day for as long as he lived. He began sailing gently downward and westward. His mother was right: The wind is cold on the heights.

There were milestones in Tormod's life, moments that changed his feeling of who and what he was.

There was the moment when he first created a small bubble of light, floating in the air above his hand, weaker than a candle but undeniably magic. From that moment on, he would view himself as a wizard, whatever else he was.

There was the moment when he laid his hand on his leg after Rune's vicious kick, and reached out to the power and washed away the pain. From then on, he knew that he could heal at least himself, probably others. If only he survived, he would be able to claw himself back somehow, and do something good for the world.

There was the moment when Rune's trousers began to smoke and blacken before bursting into flames. From then on, he knew that he had the potential not only for good, but also for great evil. The impotent rage and fantasies of revenge that had built up in him over years of bullying were suddenly a threat to his own self-image and, eventually, to the world his mother expected him to protect.

There was the moment when his cousin backed away from him in fear and confusion, unable to accept what he was. From then on, he knew that he would have to hide a part of himself even from those he liked and trusted in other things.

There was the moment when Big Boy stood, stunned and alone, looking at his comrade writhing on the ground in pain, pain he had caused. From that moment,

Tormod knew that he was no longer the weak boy who needed to resort to magic simply to survive. He was an equal and more than an equal to humans his own age, with simply his brain and body.

And now there was the moment when the ground fell away below him and he felt the dizzying fear and exhilaration of flying free. From now on, he no longer defined his supernatural powers simply by the tropes of medieval magic fantasy; he was also a superhero of sorts - or a supervillain, if his darker side took hold. It was up to him to choose which. In a way, his X-ray vision had been a preview of that, but it never had the same raw visceral feeling of "super" as when he saw the trees shrink beneath him and the horizon open up around him in the clear winter air.

There was also the fact that his powers had always been tiny. They were party tricks rather than superpowers or wizard powers. Even setting Rune's pants on fire had taken so long that it would never have worked if the boy had not been badly drunk and distracted. His light-weaving could make simple floating shapes, but not even make something invisible. His healing could fix a kick to the shin but not a stomach flu. His electrical powers could sense smartphones, not summon lightning. His X-ray vision required him to hold his hand over whatever he wanted to see through. His telepathy needed him to touch the other person. His timejump was only 1 minute, just enough to run away but not to prepare - not that anyone would ever see it. When his anti-gravity halved his weight, or even when it reduced it to 15%, it fit right in with the rest. A human grasshopper, able to jump tall chairs in a single bound. But this, this was different.

As he landed by the shore, he felt that something big had changed. Even though he could fly no faster than he could walk, and quite a bit slower than he could run these days, he could fly vertically. He could rise above. Anyone seeing him take to the air would not think "party trick". They would think "Holy cow! He is not human!" They would cower in fear, or try to kill him. They would see him as a god among men, or a demon. They would expect him to save or damn the world.

He had never felt such awe and pure joy in using his power as when he looked down on the land from a hundred meters above it. And yet this was a power he just could not use freely. It was too big, too impressive. It was the power he most wanted to use, and that he could least afford to. And so he turned around and walked back to the school, leaving footprints in the snow.

The cold grew deeper as January turned into February. This suited Tormod just fine: Less people outdoors, more safe for him to practice his flying. Or hovering, because it was not exactly the super-fast movement that you expect from the comic books. Well, five kilometers an hour is pretty impressive when moving straight up, but for moving sideways it is not faster than a brisk walk. And even when moving vertically, it gets kind of boring once you don't see the landscape fall away below you anymore. Still, it was fun to swoop around above the treetops in his ski goggles. And the cold was not a big problem: He could use his "hot thought" to heat the inner layers of his clothing. His nose was still cold unless he covered it for a while, but it did not freeze off.

The "new car smell" of the flight power gradually faded, although it remained a favorite hobby for now. He had other things to occupy his time as well. For one thing, Unni kept mailing him several times a day about seemingly random things, from school work to some small thing that had happened to a friend or relative of her which Tormod did not know from Adam. Perhaps Unni too believed in the mysterious force known as the Patriarchy, which ties together all the world's men in a huge conspiracy. If such a conspiracy existed, Tormod definitely did not get its memos. But he did get Unni's.

In addition to the random mail, the two of them would hang out fairly regularly, sometimes in his room but more often in one of the girls' rooms. There would always be a couple other girls there, and in the beginning Unni's roommate was always one of them, but soon they would hang out with the two girls who inhabited some other room. There were at least four rooms that belonged to allies of Unni and that they randomly used to hang out in real life. So clever was this arrangement that even Tormod did not realize until a ways into February that he and Unni were an item in the public opinion, even after the early rumors of premarital hanky-panky were largely dispelled.

"Unni seems like a good catch" said Joachim the Striver With a Human Face, as they compared notes after an unannounced test. "Dang, I got number 17 wrong. I was sure it was a trick question. She is pretty, smart, subtle and has ambition in spades, the one thing you seriously lack. Well, you don't match up to my rugged good looks, but you have a certain boyish charm, or so they say. What I'm saying is, Unni is an alpha female, and she sniffed you out before the rest of the pack. She may not have a great rack, but it is just right for a career woman. Melons don't really look great in a business suit. You should do at least a minimum to keep her."

"That was quite a multifaceted assessment" said Tormod. "I like her as a friend, but I don't recall her asking me to be her boyfriend, and I certainly did not ask her. Anyway, I think your answer on 22 is too short. That was the real trick question: The answer is obvious, but the explanation is what shows whether you understood it."

"They know I understand it. I am one of the six best in this class. Probably one of the five best, but that black-haired girl in the corner is a dark horse. Anyway, Unni is totally asking you to be her boyfriend, she is just not saying it out loud. The more time you spend with her, the more the other suitors on both sides will give up and slink away. You are the alpha couple and everyone knows it. And she has a nice enough backside, although it doesn't make guys walk into lampposts like Marit's. By the way, you may have noticed that Unni is maneuvering to keep Marit away from you. All the losers are waiting for Marit to give up on you so they can get a chance."

"When did this turn into a relationship advice column anyway?"

"When you got the two most popular girls in class to follow your every move. I think you remember the day pretty well. The day you revealed yourself as the Alpha Male. I remember hearing about it and thinking 'aww, there goes my harem'. And sure enough."

"We are in first grade of high school. This is not the time to settle down and marry."

"Well, it can't hurt to try to secure assets that will continue to profit you for the rest of your career."

An asset for the rest of his career? If he was to live even half the lifespan of his father, this girl would at best see the beginning of his "career". And besides, if she truly was ambitious, then he was the asset to her career rather than the other way around. She could not possibly know what he was. As much as he enjoyed her company, they did not have that kind of future together. He did not want to mislead her, but he also did not want to mistrust her. It was not certain that she saw things the way Joachim did. One way or another, he would learn with time.

March was almost considered spring these days, although old folks said that it used to be part of winter. The first part really was, at least in the sense of "green winter" along the coast, with wind and sleet or at best rain just above freezing. The weather got a little milder toward the end of the month, but there wasn't really any spring mood, at least not outdoors. At school, the teachers were vaguely starting to talk about the upcoming exams, although Easter break had not even begun yet. All except the Strivers ignored it, and the Strivers did not need it.

Tormod had never been as social as he was now. But it was a strange, disjointed form of socializing. Joachim and his Striver friends only talked about school work and career. All of them had detailed career plans stretching at least a couple decades into the future, which seemed bizarre to Tormod in an age where everything was changing faster and faster. His smartphone was barely considered smart anymore, as new and greatly enhanced versions of the operating system was released but only for newer phones. Interweb news told about electric self-driving cars being tested by Apfel, and Gogool was rumored to be developing smart watches and visors. In a world changing from year to year, how far into the future could you plot your own course? The best path seemed to him the one that was the most open, in this case a general education. The one he was taking here was already uncomfortably specialized, although it did give general study competence for higher education. And at least the quality of the teacher and equipment could not be faulted.

In contrast to the Strivers, the small Nerd community was wide open to the future. All kinds of tech news were of interest, even if most of them were not particularly handy with a soldering iron. Having the newest gadgets and the newest software was high status for a Nerd. But at the same time they were happy to waste their time watching anime or reading comic books. Born smart, they relied on their natural intelligence to coast through school. And with teachers like these, that might just happen, although they were unlikely to pick the very highest hanging fruit that the Strivers fought over.

Perhaps the strangest group was Unni and her friends, though. He used to hang out with them every other day or so. They did not really fit into the same clearly defined types as the boys. Formally they were religious, but it did not appear much in everyday conversation. They had a healthy interest in school work, but it seemed to be a goal in itself rather than part of a career move. In fact, their ideas of the future were almost too vague, although it generally included a career, a husband, a house and a child. The details of any of these seemed almost purposely vague, as if they had far more detailed plans written down somewhere that they did not want to share with just ordinary

friends. They would talk about seemingly random things, jumping from topic to topic. Whenever they strayed into girly things for too long, such as beauty products or dieting, someone - usually Unni - would try to bring up something that might interest Tormod. The truth was that most boy things interested him no more than girl things; but the things that truly interested him were not to be talked about with classmates.

Late in the evening he would talk on the phone with the one person who he could talk to freely about his real life. His mother would call him if he had not called her, even if they did not have much to say. She wanted to be sure he had survived another day, probably. But it was not uncommon that he had something to talk about, like the flying conditions (which had been terrible for weeks) or his latest timejump tests showing a modest increase in reach, seeming to stretch toward 2 minutes. Luckily they were just tests; he had not needed to escape an angry mob for a long time now. Long might it last!

Chapter 14: Power unlocked: pregnancy vision

Just before the end of March, the school emptied out as Easter break began. The next week would be the Holy Week of that religion, commemorating the end of the mortal life of its founder, Jesus Christ. Tormod had a rather tense relationship with that religion, as he strongly suspected that it had never been intended in the first place, at least not intended to become what it had been for the last 1500 years or so. But what did he know. Tormod was not the Son of God, just a son of a god. Big difference. Certainly there was a big difference in personality between them. Tormod was by and large happy for each month passing by without him sending anyone to the hospital. Occasionally when he heard the teachers talk about Jesus - as they did with alarming regularity, given that it was a Christian school - Tormod wondered if Jesus had been tempted to the same things as him. Quite possibly. Jesus once said that getting angry at your brother was pretty much like killing him. Tormod had no younger half-brothers, but he suspected the temptation to set them on fire would have been overwhelming.

Then again, he managed to spend all of Easter break at home without setting his grandma on fire, so there was that. But then he managed this mainly by avoiding her nearly at all costs, including several short time jumps when he ran into her by accident.

In contrast, his mother was super happy to have him home, even for a short while. There are all kinds of parents in the world, but his mother literally treated him as a god's gift to humankind. There were times when Tormod felt that his mother ought to be the one with superpowers, not him. She would definitely have found ways to use them for good. For him, they were mostly just party tricks he never got to use.

That said, he actually did manage to heal his mother's common cold, just barely. Tormod had not had anything like that for over a year, so he had not had any chance to try it. Well, he could have tested it on his classmates, but surely nothing good could come of that.

On Thursday, when the offices were closed anyway, Tormod's mother drove him way out in the countryside where there was nothing but farms and little enough of that. She backed the car into a logging road on a stretch where there was not a house in sight. It was an overcast day but no rain. They walked along the dirt road for a while. Small piles of snow still lay about, but mostly the ground was just wet, with rotting leaves from last fall. They came to a clearing.

"Here" said his mother.

He put on his ski goggles and wrapped the scarf across his lower face. Then he rode the invisible elevator up, up and away. He could see his mother's face as she looked up toward him, a big smile on her face. But then the smile was too small to see, as she slowly dwindled to a colored speck in the clearing. He was definitely moving faster than usual, perhaps not half again as fast, but noticeable to him. Enough of that, there was no point in being invisible to her. He started spiraling downward, and gradually she became fully visible again. He landed with practiced precision in front of her. She was beaming,

and so was he.

"My little baby has grown so much!" she said.

"You know, I am 17. 'Little baby' may be a while ago." But he said it gently. He had longed to share this with someone, and finally he had.

"You could probably carry me up a bit" she said. "I don't mean any fancy looping and stuff, just let me see the treetops from above."

"Mom, I don't have superstrength yet."

"Are you calling your mother fat?"

"Nope, you are pretty average. I am just afraid of losing you, is all."

"I'll hold on to you too. Just fly carefully."

"I am not really used to carrying people."

"Oh, you haven't been practicing with the girls at school?"

"No, I think... You must be joking!"

"Of course I am. OK, I'll teach you. Place your left arm here, and your right arm here. That's right. Now I'll hold on here. See if you can fly with this heavy load."

He could. It hardly mattered, he discovered. He had to restrain himself to not fly as fast as usual. Instead he sailed up into the air and swooped low over the treetops for a little while.

"Ah, this brings back memories. Flying with your dad was so romantic. Don't worry, I am not mistaking you for him. But this is a lot of fun too. Even if it is a little chilly."

"Well, Easter is early this year."

They circled above the forest for a little while, then landed by the car.

"I wonder how fast you can fly next year" said his mother. "And how strong you will be. It is amazing how much you have changed over this last year."

"People say I still look like I am 15."

"Well, you used to look like you were 14 when you were 16, so that makes sense. But for a 15 year old you sure are strong. And you sure fly better than most 15 year olds, too!"

When Tormod returned to the boarding school, spring was in the air: The weather was milder, the days were growing longer, and even people without a tiny heat power could spend more time outdoors. That meant it was more risky for him to fly, and he gradually did so less and less. He felt he had decent control by now, but the speed did not keep improving quickly as it had early on. Truth to tell, the "new car smell" of his only major superhero power was wearing off. It had been amazing the first time he saw the ground spread out below him, but humans have a surprising ability to get used to almost everything, and especially good things. And he was clearly human in that regard, at least.

He continued to hang out with Unni, as she seemed to continue enjoying his company, and he enjoyed hers, despite her unfocused rambling when talking about other things than school. Perhaps it was something about this school, but it seemed hard to hang out with groups of boys and girls, as was common elsewhere in society as

far as he knew. Even during recess, girls mostly stuck with girls and boys with boys. Any mixing was in small number during occasions such as these, although usually a boy would not hang out alone with two or three girls all the time. And not with the same girl all the time unless they were more than friends. He remembered what Joachim had told him, but he could not say how far it was right. She did not seem to want anything more than hanging out, which was probably for the best, what with his suspected heat-seeking quantum tunneling sperm and all. He wondered sometimes if there was any truth to that at all or whether his mother just could not stomach the thought of him having sex. He certainly preferred not to think in any detail about how he himself came to this world.

And then there came one overcast April day, just when he thought nothing would change until the exam fever would make everyone forget everything. Midway through their real-life hangout, Unni excused herself to go to the ladies' room. She never did that, so what happened next did not catch him completely by surprise. It was her roommate Trine who spoke:

"So Tormod, what do you think about Unni?"

"Hmm, she is kind of relaxing to hang out with, I guess. But I am not sure why she wants to spend so much time with me. We probably spend six hours together each week, not counting class. That's more than I've spent with anyone except my mom."

"Perhaps she likes you?" said the other girl, whose room they were in.

"I would hope so, that she does not just force herself to take care of me for some obscure reason."

"I mean, perhaps she really likes you?"

"I am sure she has a reason for what she does, but I don't know what she would like about me. We don't have a lot in common. I am kind of smart these days - I wasn't always that - but that is not something you like, that's something you admire or respect if you are a sympathetic person, or envy if you are not. I hope there isn't anything else special about me that people can see."

"Hmm, what would that be, I wonder?" asked Trine.

"Perhaps my elite dodging and running skills, honed after more than a decade of being punched, kicked and chased all over the place?"

The girls giggled. "I don't think you are giving yourself enough credit" said Trine. "You stood your ground against four bullies after all."

"Well, I avoided getting hurt and one of them did not. I am not sure that is something to be proud of. I always used to be small and weak and clumsy, and even then bigger boys would gang up on me. When they stopped growing, I continued. So I have an advantage. I have a lot of advantages, it seems to me, but I don't do much about them. I don't have ambition and initiative. It's like I'm waiting for my destiny to come to me."

"Perhaps it did?"

"Perhaps so" he said, but he knew he did not mean it the same way she did.

It was hard to say whether it was because of the conversation with the two girls or just general May madness, what with exams looming, but Unni seemed less eager to

spend time with Tormod now, and he as usual did not press the matter. It had been her idea from the start, after all. The time they spent together was anyway more and more spent on school work. Tormod did not have a literally superhuman intelligence, but it was safely in the genius range at least, and even this school had only a handful of students in his range. Part of it was that a number of the absolute geniuses did not study economics but chose general theoretical studies, aiming for the most exclusive university studies such as physician or veterinary. Tormod might have done the same, but things happened, and now he was here, helping Unni and her friends study for the finals by the end of the month.

May was also the time when Norway exploded into full spring, when weather could turn from winter jacket one day to shorts and T-shirt the next. Spring flowers and light green trees were followed by a profusion of other flowers, including flowering fruit trees that eventually shed their petals like snowflakes on the wind. Usually it was also a month with four extra free days: May 1st was a holiday because of Norway's Social Democrat history, May 17th was Constitution day which marked the birth of the modern nation, then there were the religious holidays of Ascension Day and Whit Monday, or Second Day of Pentecost as it was called here. This year however Constitution day just happened to be on Ascension Day, to the consternation of many workers who felt cheated out of a paid free day. For the conscientious students at the Trade Academy however it made little difference, as they were now frantically trying to catch up with the studies they had always wanted to do but never found the time for, or repeating the things they had learned but since forgotten.

The few couples that had formed over the year, mainly in the second and third grade, had a harder time concentrating on their studies. Late spring was arguably the most romantic time of the year, and there was holding of hands and stuff like that in public. Hopefully it did not go too far when not in public, but the forest was only a short walk from the school grounds, so who knew. Well, actually, in one single case, Tormod knew. And the way he knew drove home once more why he was not one of the happy couples, nor could he be in the near future.

Tormod was in the dining hall, on his way to grab a healthy heaping of farmer's omelet, when he noticed something odd about a third-year girl he knew by looks but not by name. She was together with one of the more sporty boys of that year, but they were not immediately beside each other right now. She was also by the buffet, but somehow his eyes were drawn to her, and not in the way a boy's eyes may be drawn to a girl, although she was attractive enough. But she seemed to be glowing in a different way from that. Like her life force was different, if such a thing even existed. It bugged him. He felt like he ought to know what was different about her, but he could not say. Not until he passed less than two meters from her.

Suddenly, as he looked just beside her instead of straight at her, it burst into view. An aura, like one of those Kirlian photographs where living things are surrounded by bands of color. He could not see them very clearly and he could not interpret them very clearly, although he felt that the brightest colors were those that represented the most health; they were rather vague and blurry to him at the moment though. But there was one thing he could see at a glance, and without doubt. Inside her aura, there was

another aura. Another living being, with its own bright colors, was living in her belly. It was tiny, but its aura was intense and energetic, and extended into and lent streaks of color to hers.

The girl moved on, and the vision faded. But there was no doubt what he had seen. He had just seen her aura, and the aura of a fetus. The girl was pregnant, and fairly recently judging from the size of the tiny life inside her. He was not even sure if she knew it herself, but probably. It wasn't just an egg, its aura was quite lively, but it was very small.

New power added: Pregnancy vision! Actually, he hoped it was a bit more general than that.

After all the long months, the exams came almost too suddenly. The people who wanted help during the last couple weeks were practically thronging around Tormod, so that he would hardly had time to read for his own exams even if he wanted to. Unlike your ordinary high school, getting into the first year was not a guarantee to stay for all three. You had to qualify, and a particularly well qualified (or paid) outsider might take your place even so. Tormod had no serious worry about his grades. He had studied daily through the year, he had an excellent long-term memory now, and apart from the exams he would also be graded by the teachers, who pretty much universally loved him. And still, he knew it would not be enough.

After the exams, it was time to take yearbook photos, write in each other's yearbooks or "memory book" as they were called here, and say goodbye. The goodbyes could occasionally be tearful between girls who had become close friends and where one or both might not return. Between boys in the same situation, it was solemn. But in many cases, it was a joyful day. There were those who were happy to be out of school for a while, and there were many who had made friends and good memories that would follow them over the years. Pretty much all the classmates were in the community on GBook, so they could stay in touch no matter where in the world they ended up. And of course, a majority of the first-year students were coming back next year.

Meeting everyone face to face as they said goodbye for the summer gave Tormod a great chance to practice his Kirlian power, as he called it when he told his mother. She did not have any good answer to what it was and how it worked, as his father had never told her about it. The Interweb did not really have a lot of useful information either. Aura reading was supposedly widespread, but the colors people perceived varied from one school of mysticism to another, as did the shape and size of the aura. He could not avoid the notion that these people were probably imagining the whole thing, which meant he might be as well. Rather than just fantasy, however, it might be that the Kirlian aura just was a way the mind presented subconscious knowledge. This knowledge could be true or false, depending on your intuition or paranormal powers, if any. What was widely agreed was that shadows in the aura was bad news. Luckily there was very little of that here.

And then it was Unni's turn. They were supposed to exchange memory books and write a small page of greetings to remember each other by. She was smiling, and her

aura seemed healthy enough. "Well, we haven't seen each other that much lately, I know you've been very busy, but hopefully we still remember each other. And still will, over the summer. Even so..."

I am not going to come back here. I am going to miss you, but there is no helping it. The headmaster is not going to let me back in after I demonstrated my telepathy on him.

"Telepathy? OMG!" She stared at him in total shock. "That was you right now, wasn't it? I heard your voice in my head!"

"Uh..." *I can send thoughts without touching now?*

"Yes. Yes, you can. What in the world are you?"

The son of ... NO. I can't share this with her.

"You are the son of Satan? The Antichrist?"

Almost as far off as you get. I am the son of a demigod, but your religion calls them demons. How is that fair? Have I ever done anything demonic to you? To anyone who did not threaten the innocent?

"You made me fall in love with you! You never told me about any of this! How long have you been reading my mind?"

I can't read minds without touching your skin, and I went out of my way to not do that. I did not even know I could send my thoughts without touching, so if anything you are the one who knows me better than I know you. And you never said anything to me about love. How was I supposed to know?

"I can't believe this!"

Perhaps it is better if you don't. It is not like anyone will believe you even if you tell them.

He watched her run away, clutching the autograph book. And so this ended, like everything he did, badly. The powers that he thought would set him free always threw him into a deeper hole, hurting those who cared for him in the process.

I play dice with the gods and everyone loses.

Chapter 15: Hey, what about my pension?

"It sucks right now" said Tormod's mother. "Of course it does. And you were not even in love with her. It would have been extremely painful if you were, and she still ran away from you in fear. And she probably would have, even if you had loved her like crazy. Because she is human, and you are already more than that. Even a small thing like telepathy will scare most people. If they saw you fly, as you said by Easter, they would probably either worship you or try to kill you. So you have to hide until you can no longer be killed and are worthy of worship. How long that is, I do not know. Years for certain, probably decades, possibly centuries. I really don't know how these powers scale. And until then, you have to be extremely careful about what you show, and who you show it too. You may like them, they may like you, but it could all turn around in an instant if they stop seeing you as a fellow human."

Tormod had come home, but his mother was still worried about him staying there. "I have a couple ideas for where you could go next" she told him. "One is to study abroad as an exchange student. Your English is impressive, so it would probably not be so hard, but I don't like you being so far away, across the sea. In case you suddenly have to escape, I mean. That said, I have been planning while you were in school. I have gotten to know a bunch of ... interesting people. And I think you may even get a chance to use some of your powers some of the time and not be feared and hated. Not all of the powers all of the time, obviously. If they see you zooming up, up and away, all bets are off. But things like healing and X-ray vision, now and then, as long as it does not work too reliably."

"I guess that would be OK. I mean, I am not sure I can heal others at all, but I am not sure I can't either. And I am pretty sure I can avoid flying - I had to do so the last two months since there were people everywhere. But who are these people?"

"They are New Age people. They believe in the power of crystals, benevolent aliens, reincarnation, ascended masters, automatic writing, ancient prophecies, and most importantly, indigo children."

"OK, it disturbs me that I understood most of that, but seriously, dark blue children? You sure they don't mean black? Or are we talking indie-go, as in going independent? Because I can totally do that."

"No, it is a symbolic trait. In fact, this has been around since the 70es, and a new generation has recently arrived. Crystal children, which happened to appear on Earth around the same time as you. They are even more amazing than indigo children, but evidently still fairly rare. You, baby, could pass for one of them if you don't use your more scary powers. Crystal children don't set people on fire. They are too good and holy for that. They are here to save the world."

"Well, so am I, but I don't really feel like it. I mean, I don't really feel like I could do it if I wanted to, and I am not sure I would want to save the world even if I could. It is a shitty place filled with shitty people. As long as you survive, I don't really care that much about

the rest. Even the nice ones only betray me in the end."

"Well, living with people who believe in you might change your outlook. You would still have to hold back, but less than now. And a single mistake - as long as it does not kill or maim anyone - would hopefully be possible to explain away."

"But these indigo crystal children, are they real? Do you think there could be others like me? I mean, there was a plethora of gods in the olden days. Why wouldn't they make some coordinated effort to save the world by leaving a bunch of us here?"

"Well, that is one of the things you may be able to find out if we send you to America's west coast, where most of the true believers seem to have settled. My theory is that they are just imagining things, but who knows."

"You know, mom, this sounds better than this past year."

"Right?"

"Then again, this past year seemed like a good idea and ended in disaster."

"Actually you got great grades. You'll get over your friend."

"In a few centuries, sure."

"Let's go for a drive" said Tormod's mother.

"You want to fly again, eh?" said Tormod.

"That too" she said.

It was a warm day, at the start of July, so they did not need to take any outerwear. Soon they were by the car. She opened the door. "Get in here."

"You are going to teach me to drive?" he asked. He had not brought that up for a long time, and when he lived here, he was really too young.

"You are going to be 18 this winter. Might as well get you started."

"About that ... I hear that it is hard to function in America without a car. Perhaps I should wait with going there until I have a license at least?"

"I am not sure whether our licenses are valid there, but you should go as soon as possible. It is probably the safest place for you on Earth, if you don't go crazy at least. Your host family will provide. Even in America, it can't be common for high schoolers to drive their own car."

"Probably not."

"Drive slowly at first. We'll see whether you learn this as quickly as your school work."

"Hey, I am an indigo crystal child. I am totally going to ace this."

"That does not make me feel any safer at all. Even if you are joking, the fates may be listening."

"Tell the fates I am totally joking."

"Concentrate on your driving, not your joking."

They drove up into the hills, took off along a side road toward some farms, and parked on a meeting spot where the road was wider so cars could pass each other.

As Tormod picked up his mother in his arms, she looked at his face and smiled. "No need to be embarrassed. I used to carry you around all the time for years!"

"But I was a baby back then!"

"You will always be my baby."

"Don't say that like it's a good thing!"

"You are the good thing, the greatest gift I ever got. Now let's get flying!"

Soon they sailed upward, until they could see the two farms at the end of the road, about a kilometer away. They flew lower again and the farms fell out of view as they flew only ten meters or so above the treetops, following a stream upward as it wound its way among the low rolling hills.

"You are faster now."

"Yeah. I think I may be about twice as fast as when I started out. That was about a brisk walking speed, this is more like running. But I am not exhausted."

"That is good, because I'd rather not we get stranded *too* far from the car."

"Not tired at all."

"And I'm not heavy, I hope?"

"Not as much as last time."

"You better weigh your words more carefully, young man!"

"I guess I have grown stronger again."

"You don't need to guess, I can feel it too. You are stronger and faster even though it is only two months ago!"

"Actually it was the first week in April. So three months on Thursday."

"It is less than three months, so in other words two months."

"Why are we even arguing about this?"

"Because you look just the same as you did this spring, but you are noticeably stronger and faster. That means it is your demigod powers, spilling over into your body. You no longer have only your natural human strength, you have begun to have superhuman strength too. That does not mean that you are stronger than any and all humans yet, but that you are stronger than you would have been with mere human strength for your body. Your body still looks 15 at best, so you being as strong as a young adult is already supernatural."

"Great. So in time I will be able to leap tall buildings without levitation? Run faster than a speeding bullet? Stop a running train in its tracks?"

"Not to mention beat up frost giants and take their lunch money. If you can think of it, you can probably do it. OK, probably not move Earth by pushing. And none of the things you mention are likely to happen anytime soon, I'm afraid. But at least you are still growing."

"If you say so."

"You told me you were able to see auras now" said Tormod's mother.

"Don't worry, yours is all bright and beautiful!" he answered.

"And I am not pregnant?"

"Not even a little bit!"

"But seriously, I have been thinking. If you can see auras, it must mean your healing power has grown to a point where you can heal others. Otherwise it would be totally

useless."

"Most of my powers are useless, mom!"

"I don't think so. But anyway, with your aura sight, you should be able to direct your healing better. It might be time to take on your grandma. I have waited for this, I don't intend to wait much longer."

And she didn't. The next day, she dragged Tormod with her and confronted her mother. "I'm taking five weeks of vacation starting next week. I mean real vacation, away from work and away from here. I'm going on a trip with my son."

"So he has convinced you to abandon your own mother? You are going to let me die here, helpless and alone? There is no way I can get hired help in just a few days."

"Not to worry! Your beautiful grandchild here will heal you using his demigod powers."

"Don't let that thing near me! If he were to touch me, I might be possessed by demons!"

"If you got any more demonic than you already are" said her daughter with a flat voice, "you might actually go to Hell without having to die first. That would be interesting to see, but my son is not going to bring it about."

"I won't let that thing near me! I'd rather die."

"Well, it is your choice then. You can let him try to heal you, or you can fend for yourself with one arm and no legs. If he tries but does not manage to heal you by Saturday, I stay here and care for you as usual. If he succeeds, you don't need me. If you don't let him try, I leave anyway."

"I am never going to forgive you for this!"

"I have been your unpaid slave for over a decade. It has to end, one way or another. Now you would rather stay crippled than let me have a normal life? And you think YOU are the one who needs to forgive ME?"

"I will strike you from my will!"

"I don't care. Tormod will inherit me, so I doubt you would leave me anything if you can avoid it. Do you think I worked like a slave for you out of greed? I am not like you. What I have done is pay back in full and with interest all you did for me when I was a child. It is time to end this, one way or another. You can have your health back, or you can pay an arm and two legs to spite me. Oh, and pay an arm and a leg for hired help too."

"Fine, you can leave this house now and never return."

"That's ... not very smart of you."

"I don't need to listen to you. Leave now!"

"OK. Come Tormod."

"But all our stuff is in the house!"

"I can buy new stuff. Come."

They went outside, got in the car and started driving up in the hills again. "You drive, she is going to call me and I don't want to talk on the phone while driving."

About a quarter of an hour later, grandma called. "You can't do this to me!" she shouted.

"You told me I could" said Rannveig and ended the call.

The older woman called a couple more times, making it clear how serious she was, and was shut off each time. Eventually it changed into "You can come back, if you..."

"I will come back if you let Tormod try to heal you. Otherwise I will see you at your funeral."

Tormod got an hour and a half of driving practice before his grandma relented.

"OK, I'll drive now. That will be faster. She is probably getting hungry, poor thing." And so they drove back.

"You know, I don't even know whether I can heal you" said Tormod. "But I can't infuse you with demons, no matter how much you might deserve it."

"Just get this over with" muttered the old woman.

"OK. I'll try the arm first." He looked intently at her aura, and let his mind step into the Power. A warm brightness spilled out from his fingers, moving as if a living river of light through her aura, seeking the dark irregular break in the aura pattern, and washing it away like clay dissolves in running water. He could feel a small amount of energy run out of him, as if he had lifted something a little heavy, but it was not a big deal. Then the flow stopped, and he sat back.

The older woman stared at him in surprise. Whatever she had expected was clearly not what she had felt. Then she moved the hand that she had not even felt in more than ten years. Weekly, she lifted her arm, cautiously moving it around.

"OK, give me your hand again, I will try the spine break now."

She just nodded. He concentrated again, in that open effortless way, letting the wizardry happen rather than trying to force it. It moved on its own accord, the flow of brightness winding its way through her aura and attacking the darkness. No, not attacking, just washing it away. This was a much larger patch of darkness, and he ran out of ... something. He was not exhausted, although he was a bit tired. But it was something else, like how there are limits to how long you can hold your breath. In the same way, there was a limit to how long he could hold this flow of energy running. He had to take some deep breaths and try again. Most of the darkness was already gone, but he would try to get it all.

The energy seemed to be flowing even more easily the third time. He felt noticeably drained now, but it was fascinating to see her aura restore itself completely. Finally, he let go.

Tormod and his mother watched quietly as the woman in the wheelchair cautiously moved her feet, her legs. She gripped the edge of the table with her strongest hand, the one that had been working the whole time, and pulled herself up. She stood, unsteadily, like a calf taking its first steps. Within minutes, instincts and decades of practice came back to her, and she was moving around more or less naturally, although she did not have the full strength of her muscles yet.

"Well, we should be packing said her daughter."

"I guess." She seemed to still be lost in wonder. And then, suddenly: "Wait, what will happen to my disability pension?"

Tormod and his mother lived in a small cabin in the mountains, where the wind was

cool and the air was clear. It was just for five weeks, her five weeks of vacation. Her first vacation since her mother's accident. She could barely be gone a weekend for all those years, and she enjoyed it immensely. She also enjoyed spending time with her son, it seemed. It was almost embarrassing sometimes.

They would train his telepathy. It had already landed him in trouble more than once, so she decided he needed to learn to restrain it, to choose when he sent his thoughts and when he kept them private. "It is probably not much different from talking" she mused. "When you were little, you would say everything that popped into your head. You had no filter. Thinking and talking were the same to you, it often seemed. But over time you learned to keep secrets. In a way that was sad, but it is needed in this world. Now you need to learn it again, and it is even more important in a way, since people get so upset when they hear your voice in their head."

So they practiced every day. For some reason, his mother could "hear" his thoughts from two meters away, but he could not hear hers unless they were actually touching skin to skin. Even their fingertips meeting seemed enough to establish the communication, and it very rarely failed. His mother kept a small notebook and found that over time they seemed to succeed "about 49 times out of 50". After a couple weeks he was getting noticeably better at hiding his thoughts as well. It was mostly a matter of habit. And when his thoughts leaked out, they were rarely clear and verbal. It was more that she could feel him looking at her, or sense his mood, or know that he was hungry. Of course, that might be guessing, because he was hungry a lot. The mountain air and running around a lot would do that to a teen boy.

The running was partly also his mother's idea. He preferred flying. The cabin was an old and primitive one, without the modern comforts of new cabins. But unlike them, it was lying by itself almost half an hour's walk from the end of the road. They had been able to rent it cheaply because of this, but to them it was a bonus. Even so, his mother had him run at least a kilometer away from the cabin before flying. She also tested his running speed, with and without carrying her. The last part was a bit embarrassing. Was it really normal for young men to carry their mothers around like this? Well, at least they got data.

"You are not near the world record" she said after measuring him running at full speed. "But given the terrain, you are probably within range of the Norwegian record, not counting Kenyan runners living in Norway."

"I don't just run fast" he admitted. "I can do everything faster than other people. I have to hold back to not stand out. I read faster, I write faster, I tie my shoelaces faster. It is as if everyone else has slowed down over this past year, so they take not quite twice as long as I would do, but probably three quarters extra. So it is not that I am a good runner ... I run normally, I just *live* faster."

"Well, you certainly don't *age* faster" she said. "You still look like 15."

"You've told me often enough, mom!"

"I have? I just think it is amazing. You seem to be aging more slowly the older you get. At some point perhaps you are going to stop completely. Well, that may be too optimistic."

"I am not sure whether that is optimism or pessimism" he replied. "I mean, seeing

everyone around me grow old and die. I don't like the thought of losing you. And if I ever find a woman who accepts me for who I am, I will lose her again and there is nothing we can do about it."

"Well, everyone loses their loved ones. If you die, you still lose them. It is extremely rare that people die together, and if they do, it is almost always in some kind of tragedy. The difference is that you will have time to process your grief and live again. But first you need to survive long enough without being captured by the CIA and whatnot."

The midsummer was long past, and with the coming of August, the weather in the mountains was starting to cool a little, although it was still not fall. Down in the lowlands this was the warmest weeks of the years, even though the sun set a little earlier each day. Eventually Tormod and his mother bid a fond farewell to the wooden cabin and returned to the house in Heiedal.

The practice seemed to have helped Tormod in more ways than finally controlling his telepathy. He had also become an expert chef with his "microwave vision" as he called it, as he could use it to cook and fry food, given a bit of time. It was still a very weak power compared to Superman in the comic books, but it was enough to make a dinner for two quicker than firing up the wood stove. According to his mother's notebook, he could heat a liter of water by 20 degrees Celsius per second. The effect for food seems to be slightly higher, probably because water has a very high heat capacity. But what improved the most during the five weeks in the mountain cabin was his precision. In the beginning, he would accidentally heat some nearby things in the process some of the time, but this was extremely rare at the end.

Another thing that had improved was his speed. "OK, you can probably compete with Kenyans now" his mother said after his last run. "And your stamina is amazing, although of course nothing like your dad."

"There are things I would prefer not to know about my dad's stamina" said Tormod, because his mother was rather prone to oversharing.

They were lucky and the weather turned cloudy on their trip home. Tormod drove most of the way. He was a quick learner, and truth to tell he felt safer than when his mother was driving. She had a lot more experience and her movements were pure reflex, but she was living at almost half his speed after all. But she did not seem to share his view on the matter. She pointed out that over 90% of men believe they drive better than the average man, and this was highly unlikely to hold true. It did not seem particularly unlikely to him that 90% of semi-demigods drove better than the average man, but he did not press the matter.

She was good at planning ahead, he had to give her that: He only spent two nights at home - as he still thought of it - before taking off to the USA. It was strange to think about, but his mother was quite clear that this was the last time he would see his old room, much less sleep in it. She was applying for jobs elsewhere, and since her skills was needed in pretty much every municipality in the country at some time or another, she would probably be gone before Christmas. Even though he could accept it with his mind, it was still hard for his heart to believe. He had left his home so suddenly and stayed

away for so long; and when he came back, he had spent most of the summer away - only to say goodbye forever. But at least he was not saying goodbye to his mother forever! Thanks to the "virtual hangout" function in all Algol phones, they could talk for free and even see each other anywhere they had Interweb access.

He thought of this, as he sat in the plane looking down on the Atlantic, featureless from one horizon to the next in all directions, except for some cloud banks to the north. It was an immense distance. He was vaguely aware that they were moving at an incredible speed and yet it took hours. He calculated the speed in his head, but he could not see it when looking out the window. If the plane malfunctioned here, would he be able to fly home even if he managed to get out of the plane before it crashed? It would likely take many days, perhaps even weeks, even at double the speed of walking. He could not stay awake that long. Out here, he was as helpless as any other mortal, dependent on the goodwill of the Creator or the Fates or perhaps the whims of an uncaring universe. It was still a long, long time till he could protect this planet.

Chapter 16: Chrystal children

The airport outside of New York was absolutely super huge, and so full of people milling around. And even at that, it was only one of several airports for this one city! A city with far more people than all of Norway, closing in on even Sweden which had twice as many again. And it was just one of the many large cities in America, albeit one of the larger. And as he later sat on yet another plain, flying high above the Rocky mountains where all of Norway could have been stretched out, he was struck again by the sheer massive size of this country. It was not so much a country the way he was used to it - each state was probably more like that - but rather a continent. It was not by coincidence that the name of the continents and the popular name for the nation were both "America". Although people in other American countries might resent this, it was understandable. This one country was on the same scale of size as Europe, the same order of magnitude.

The stories about Americans and cars were clearly true: As he stepped off the plane at the San Diego International Airport, a ten year old girl and her youngish-looking mother were waiting for him with a homemade banner. Evidently they did not quite trust his Crystal Child psychic powers to pick them out from the crowd, and rightly so. He had seen pictures of them, but there was quite a crowd. More importantly, he would not even have looked if he had not gotten a last minute message. He was surprised they had driven all the way here to pick him up, rather than have him take a bus. They were environmentalists, weren't they? But evidently in the USA, that was not enough to keep people from driving for two and a half hours in the hottest month of the year.

His mom had introduced him to his host family, and he had even chatted with them online briefly before he left home. The girl was actually name Crystal, so she was literally a "Crystal child". This amused him greatly. Wisely, her parents had chosen to refer to her as "Crys" in daily speak. Her mother was Eileen. They were currently living in a house with Eileen's sister, who was also an old soul in a young body, an Indigo Child like Eileen, the trailblazers for the New Age. Crystal's father was amicably separated from them but sometimes stopped by. This was what he already knew. Seeing them in the flesh, they seemed very normal, not particularly indigo or crystalline looking. Well, he would soon find out how serious they were.

As Eileen hugged him, he quietly reached out to read her mind. He could feel her sincere joy and excitement to meet this boy who she had heard about, who had already manifested his crystal powers so clearly. This was going to be great for Crys, she thought. Almost like having a big brother!

Crys hugged him too, if a little more shyly. She felt a little nervous, she was not quite sure why they were getting a boy to stay for a whole school year, but if Mom thought it was a good thing, she was probably right. Mom had said that he was like her and had special powers like her.

'I can talk to you without speaking' he thought to her, *'but I can't hear your thoughts*

unless you touch me. It is enough to touch my skin with a finger though, and I can usually hear you clearly.'

'Wow, you are much better at it than Mom and Auntie! I can totally hear you just like we're talking.'

'Hopefully when we are grown up, I can talk with you like this at a distance, but I am still learning how to use my ... crystal powers. You too?'

'I'm just ten yet so I'm still learning too.'

'That's great, let us learn together.'

Houses were cheaper in America. Then again, the climate in California, even further north, was much milder than in Norway. The family, being fairly normal middle class, had a rather large white-painted house, easily half again as large as the one where Tormod had grown up, if not closer to double. They showed him around, but without any particular pride or vanity. This kind of house was probably normal for them and their peers, still.

Eileen was 32 years old and her sister Marie was 28. Marie was at pains to make it clear that her name was French. Tormod was mildly amused by this focus, as Marie was a common enough name in several European countries, including his own, although the forms Maria and Mari were also common. The common English form, as far as he knew, was Mary. This was evidently why it was so important for Marie to make sure he knew straight away that she was never intended to be named Mary.

Overall, the sister were quite easygoing. Of course they had the usual New Age hangups such as distrust of authorities (other than their own pantheon of gurus), to the point where they had not vaccinated their daughter at all. Tormod thought, very privately, that a community of such people would need all the healing crystals they could get, including Crystal Children. Failing that - and it would probably fail - they might want to have an extra child or two to make up for those that would die in unnecessary epidemics. It was too bad that people in the modern age had taken to reusing graves in the church yards. A walk among the many, many small graves from a century ago might get them to reconsider their skepticism toward school medicine.

A much healthier quirk was their vegetarianism, another very common feature among the New Age folks. It was not an attempt to keep their weight down - although they were remarkably healthy in that way for Americans - but rather based on the logic that you don't eat your friends. This was a view he shared, and was for all practical purposes already close to a vegetarian, except he rather enjoyed milk and milk products. But then Norwegian cows had a pretty comfortable life by international standards. They could well afford to share their milk with their human benefactors, as far as he was concerned.

Tormod did not demonstrate his "crystal" powers to the sisters right away. He only used his telepathy, and only with the girl. She was completely unafraid of the phenomenon, unlike anyone else that had discovered it. Well, except for his mother, obviously. Crys loved playing with the telepathy, sitting for long sessions with their

fingers touching while she talked in his head about all kinds of rambling things, and he made the occasional comment, answered questions, and showed her memories from the beautiful Norwegian landscape and such. He was *very* glad right now for the time he had spent practicing control of his telepathy!

Obviously her mother was curious as to what they were doing, just sitting there touching each other's fingertips and grinning. Well, Crys was often giggling or laughing out loud. She explained that they were talking to each other in their heads. "I can hear him without touching him, but he cannot hear me." Naturally her mother was inordinately proud to hear that. It seemed to not at all appear to her that the girl might be making it all up. I mean, if they never spoke at all, how could she know that it really was him who answered and not her own brain? But she never seemed to consider that, and neither did her family.

Nor did they find it untoward in any way for a ten year old girl and a teenage boy to sit touching each other's hands for hours on end. He had heard that Americans were even more wary about such things than Norwegians, but not these ones. They implicitly trusted the girl. After all, she was born with a 6-dimensional consciousness, so she would notice immediately who could be trusted and who not. And she obviously trusted her new crystal brother very much.

"I have to warn you" said Eileen sadly, "that not everyone at our local school has a high frequency of vibration like you and Crys. While there are a good number of Indigo Children and even a few Crystals, more than half of the children and even some of the teachers are still not Enlightened."

"I am sorry to hear that" Tormod said sincerely. "I hope they don't physically attack me. Such a level of negative energy might be reflected back on them, causing unnecessary suffering."

"Your mother told me that this had happened in the past, but she seems confident that you are more in charge of the energies around you now."

"I am, compared to before, but I might still get overwhelmed if there is a massive amount of negativity."

"We will send positive vibrations your way!" the woman insisted.

At their first school day, the teacher actually presented him as an exchange student from Norway and told the class to take good care of him. Yeah, as if that would make much of a difference. Americans can barely point to Canada on a map, he had heard, and imagined that their country was the sole oasis of civilization in a world of communist dictatorships, superstition and abject poverty. And while they certainly spoke the local variant of English better than he did, he doubted these high school kids wrote it any better. He might have been better off claiming to be from Minnesota.

Sure enough, during the first recess, a big boy came over. His body health aura was quite sturdy, but the mind aura that surrounded it (and joined the body aura around the head) was rather chaotic even for a teen boy. Nothing good could come from this.

"Hey, do all kids in your country go to high school when they are 14, or are you some sort of freaking genius?"

"I'm 18, actually. People call me a 'Crystal Child'. Some of us look younger than our years."

"Ooh, a *Crystal Child*!" The boy looked at a brown-haired girl that sat in the middle of the room. "Did you hear that Rachel? Another *Crystal Child*! Is he your boyfriend?"

The girl looked at them with a strangely expressionless face, seemingly scanning them carefully with her eyes. "No. He is not my boyfriend. But he is a good person. You are not."

The boy laughed coarsely. "I would rather die than be a 'good person'!"

'But crazy is alright?' sent Tormod.

"What did you say?" said the boy threateningly.

Tormod blinked at him innocently.

"Did you just call me crazy?"

Tormod looked at him like he was, in fact, crazy.

"Uh, Bobby?" said another boy. "He didn't say anything."

'The voice in your head said that' sent Tormod, keeping his mouth firmly shut and looking slightly concerned.

Bobby whirled around. "Thinking you're funny, huh?"

"What?" said Tormod. "It is not meant to be funny. The family I stay with said it."

"They said I was crazy?"

"Who says you are crazy?"

"You just did!"

"Bobby" said his comrade again. "Chill, man. He did not say anything like that. He just said he was some kind of crystal kid who looked younger than he was."

"After that! He just called me crazy and said something about voices in my head."

Now everyone looked at him like he was, in fact, crazy.

"Didn't you hear it?" He looked to a bunch of the classmates that were presumably his friends or at least allies, as if waiting for them to support him, but nobody spoke up.

'I told you, it was the voice in your head' sent Tormod.

Bobby whirled around again, fists clenched, face stiff with rage. Tormod backed away, looking scared.

"One more word from you, and I'll show you..."

"Bobby!" said his friend. "Stop it. This is super creepy."

"He's not said anything" piped up another kid. "You're acting all weird."

"You too?" said Bobby. "Are you in on this? You think this is funny, huh?"

"Bobby" said the first boy who had spoken to him, one almost as big and muscular as the one called Bobby. "Let's take a walk. There's something I want to talk with you about. The little kid won't be going anywhere."

"OK. But I'm not finished with you, kid."

They walked away. Tormod looked around. "I hope this is not typical of America" he said quietly. "I had heard good things about this place."

"Don't mind Bobby" said on slender, dark-haired boy. "He's just a bully. It is best to avoid him. There are many of us here who are on your side. We are five Indigos in this

class alone, and many sympathizers who have friends or family of a higher vibration. I'm Jim, by the way. Welcome to our school."

"Tormod here. Pleased to meet you." They shook hands.

'I should probably warn you that I can read minds when shaking hands or otherwise touching living skin.'

Jim's eyes widened. "You sure are the real thing!" he exclaimed.

'I like to think so. I can also sometimes heal, but probably not cancer and AIDS and such yet.'

"Perhaps if we could link more crystals together..."

'You don't need to speak out loud by the way, I can hear your thoughts as long as we are connected.'

'Oops, sorry about that!'

'No problem. By the way, we should probably let go soon or people will think I am totally gay.'

The other boy let go of his hand as if burned and tumbled away, over to the small group of allies that were waiting for him. Even though he spoke softly, Tormod could hear him as clearly as if he stood right beside him. Then again they were not that far away, 7-8 meters he'd say.

"This kid is the real deal! He can read and send thoughts just by touching your hand."

"Seriously?" asked another boy.

"So that was what you were doing" said a girl, sounding almost disappointing.

"Not everyone is gay!" said Jim. "You've watched too much manga."

"You *read* manga and watch *anime*" corrected the girl.

"That's beside the point. The point is, we are not gay, he was reading my thoughts and I was reading his."

"It would be kind of creepy to be his girlfriend" said another girl. "I mean, knowing that he could hear everything you thought as long as you were holding hands."

"No fantasizing about other guys while making out" said a third girl.

"You are doing that?" asked Boy 2, apalled.

"You will understand it when you get a girlfriend" said Girl 3.

"It would not be creepy to be his girlfriend" said Rachel, the supposed Crystal Child. "It would be like being understood. Not being understood hurts."

"Perhaps you never think embarrassing things" said Girl 2, "but the rest of us do."

"They are only embarrassing because not understood" said Rachel. "I am not embarrassed by my own thoughts, because I know me."

"I am actually embarrassed by my own thoughts sometimes."

"Then you don't know yourself."

Tormod found himself half agreeing with Rachel. Sure he had some embarrassing memories, but they were mainly embarrassing now because they had been embarrassing then, whether or not he realized it at the time. If everyone could understand each other like themselves, embarrassment would probably disappear. But that was not realistic. Even to understand one person deeply would surely take years. Telepathy - at least at his level - was not like a data cable he could plug into someone else and copy all their memories and personality.

Tormod had finished his small errand at the boys' lavatory at school - even Crystal Children and semi-demigods have bodily functions - and was washing his hands when the door opened. There was something about the approaching footsteps that set him off. He turned, and there was the looming presence of Bobby the Bully, approaching rapidly, cutting off all escape. The handwashing faucet was at the very end of the room, with two nearby stalls leaving only a narrow corridor which the broad boy did his best to fill.

"You are not getting away this time" said Bobby. It seemed this was going to be uncomfortable for at least one of them.

"What do you want?"

"Can't you use your superpowers to find out?" taunted the bigger boy. "I hear you can read minds. That probably means you were using some kind of mind trick to make me hear voices, right?"

"Do you believe in stuff like that? Then you are a more open-minded guy than I had imagined."

"Shut up. I don't know how you do it, but your stage magic tricks don't work on me any longer. You made me look like a fool in front of my buddies, and I don't like looking the fool."

"Then you should stop acting foolishly."

"I'm gonna teach you a lesson."

Not enough room to throw him, hard enough to dodge in this corner. I am much stronger than I was, but am I strong enough to stop a punch with my hands? If only there was some way ... OUT?

Suddenly everything *shifted*. It was like jumping back in time, which he would have done except he had really really needed to go to the bathroom at that point. But he was not back in the corridor two minutes ago. He was outside, in the air, falling.

Chapter 17: Mirachel

A moment ago, Tormod had been cornered inside the boys' restroom by an angry classmate. Now he was in the air outside, and gravity did not take long to discover him. On reflex he reached out to the wizardry to fly, but in the confusion he could not quite remember how to get it right. He was only falling two floors, he could survive this. He braced himself. There was no magic that helped him, all he had left was his speed and agility. He began to crouch, absorbing the impact with his legs and then his arms as he hit the ground feet first, then hands. The shockwave of the impact slammed through his body, then stopped. He was crouching on the ground, his hands scraped and his muscles strained, but nothing broken or burst. He had survived a fall of two floors - not a superhuman feat exactly, but dangerous to an untrained human. Of course, three months of practicing fall technique with good trainers does not really qualify as untrained. *Thank you Mr Hartmann! Thank you Birgitte! You may have just saved my life.*

He stood up, a bit shakily. A couple students looked in his direction, as if unsure how and when he had suddenly appeared there. Hopefully they had not seen him appear in the air outside the boys' lavatory...

Wait, what? He looked up. There was only a tiny window that even a child would have had a hard time getting through. He had moved *through the wall!* He had done it! He had actually done it! He could *walk through walls*, just as his mother had predicted! Obviously he could not do that casually or everyone would be super creeped out. Like flying, this was not something even Crystal Children were supposed to do. It was pure magic - although some stage magicians or their assistants did it occasionally. But he could not make it a normal mode of moving from one room to another, or the CIA would totally capture and dissect him.

Tormod thought back, trying to capture the exact feeling of warping through the wall. He wanted to try it again soon to make sure he had it right, but not in plain view. He walked around the small equipment shed by the outdoors PE practice yard. Belatedly he was glad to see no one was smoking or making out behind there. Perhaps it was because it was just a short recess. He looked around. No one in sight. He put his palm on the wall. It hurt; he had scraped it during landing, but there were only shallow cuts and bruises. Concentrate...

Nope. Nothing. He could feel himself reaching out to the wizardry, but it faded with no effect. Was there something inside blocking him? He turned to X-ray scanner. No, there was nothing right there. OK, try again, at least once. Recall that feeling, the exact pattern in the brain when he warped through the wall...

Yes! Suddenly he was inside. It was half dark, with the door closed and only a couple small windows high on the wall. At least they were larger than the bathroom window, twice as wide. He could get out through those if his power failed to get him out again. It would be kind of embarrassing if he got trapped in here for no good reason and with no

explanation!

But first, his hands, especially the right. He focused his healing, and the skin closed itself until there was no sign that he had ever been hurt. Then he did the same with the left hand. It was not casual, something he could do while thinking of something else; doing it a second time right after the first felt a bit hard, but he did it. Good, he could need the practice anyway. Now to warp out of here again before he came too late to class!

The walked right into the wall, pressing against it while recalling the feeling of the warp, as he thought of it. This time it was easier. He simply disappeared on the inside of the shed and appeared on the outside, as if the film of his life had been edited to cut the part where he moved from one place to the other. But there was no such part. He had moved in the blink of an eye. If only he had a longer range, this would be the ultimate transportation! Wait, what if he had? No, there was no time to test his range now. He already had to hurry to get back to the classroom in time! But later ... He would definitely test this new power out later.

Bobby the Brutal Bully had glared at Tormod when he came back to the classroom, but there had been no further attacks. Perhaps the oaf was starting to suspect that there was more to this "stage magic" than he could understand.

Not that it was easy for Tormod to understand it himself. He practiced his "warping" through walls at home, or what passed at home these days. He made sure not to be seen by anyone in the house. The hardest part was to avoid Crys, who still spent a lot of time with him. But gradually as he became more familiar, she started spending more time with her friends, or watching TV, or playing alone. So he got some alone time to experiment with his new power.

The range was only slightly longer than he needed to pass through wall. He could get move around one meter with some regularity. Not every time, but a bit over half. Like with some other wizard powers, he could also "stretch" it, pulling more power into it, and that let him increase the range to about the double. The problem was that it noticeably decreased the chance of getting it to work in the first place. And once when he tried to move from one and a half meter into the hallway and into his own room, he suddenly appeared in the living room instead. Luckily Aunt Marie was not looking right at the spot, but she did look up. "I did not see you arriving" she said.

"Me neither" he said, but she did not inquire further. Either she thought he had just sneaked in, or she was already perfectly OK with him appearing out of thin air. Probably the first of these, he decided. He also decided to stick with the shorter range for the time being.

The days became weeks, and Tormod found himself quickly becoming friends with the New Age clique in his class and even their friends in the other classes. He had not

thought of himself as someone who got friends easily, and even at the commerce high school he had only had a few friends even toward the end of the school year. But Americans were surprisingly friendly and easygoing, except for the occasional bully.

Of course, it helped that he was an automatic member of an existing clique. As a certified Crystal Child (thanks to his telepathy) he automatically filled the spot as alpha male, despite looking three years younger than the rest. He freely (if briefly) demonstrated his telepathy with those who self-identified as Indigo Children. But when someone who was not part of their clique asked to test that it was really real, he politely declined. "Telepathy can be a disturbing experience for people who are still stuck in a materialistic mode of thinking. For those with an open mind it is easy, but I do not want to be responsible for forcing open someone's mind." Naturally the outsiders concluded that it was all 8th-grader syndrome. He could live with that disrespect. He was less convinced that he could live with being caught by the CIA and dissected in their secret underground compound.

The safest power to use is healing, his mother had advised him. There are thousands if not millions of people who claim that they can heal, so you can easily hide in the crowd. Just don't do it in front of a lot of people, and especially not scientists.

He kept this in mind when one of his new friends got a cold. He could see it in the aura already in the morning, but the symptoms grew rapidly worse over the course of the day, and in the recess after lunch he decided to put a stop to it as the boy was sneezing all over the place.

"Rachel, we should heal Chris." His real name was Christopher, but people here used short names a lot. "Will you help me?"

"I will" said Rachel.

"Take my hand" he said and gave her his left.

'You will take his right hand and I will take his left. That way will we complete the circle. Do you see his aura?' He sent her a telepathic image of the aura he was seeing. She nodded solemnly. They took the boy's hand, and Tormod opened his mind to the wizard energies. Sweet warm brightness flowed into the boy's aura, washing away the illness, and his body rapidly began to align with the aura. In a few breaths, the cold was gone.

The boy told of the instant healing to all his friends that were not present. Tormod and, more surprisingly, Rachel did not tell a soul unless asked. But then Rachel rarely said anything unless asked, or unless she decided that it was important.

So it should perhaps not have surprised him when she came over to him one day during lunch break, after he had finished eating, and grabbed his hand.

'What do you want?' he asked in her mind.

'I want to let you know me' she said. Then she began to think differently. These thoughts were not in the form of words neatly arranged in sentences. They were feelings, concepts, memories. She pulled them up and displayed them one by one but very rapidly. They just flowed from her in a steady stream, or jumble. He already knew that she was highly intelligent, but her intelligence was in some ways alien. That was a strange reaction for him, who was as alien as anyone on Earth as far as he knew. But the way her brain worked was unusual. It took other ways to arrive at the results than his or

anyone else he knew. And there was an intensity to some of her sense experiences that he had not seen before. As if her brain lacked filters most people had.

They sat like that, hand in hand, until the end of the lunch break. They did not say a word, and even telepathically there were no words except occasionally as a summary of a concept, one among many other items that she presented rapidly for him to see. Perhaps he had been wrong about telepathy not being a data cable. In her hands, at least, there was a certain similarity. But it was a serial cable, with limited bandwidth. No matter how much she wanted and tried, she could not give him every bit of herself. Even so, he felt that he knew her much better than before - or rather, that he no longer had the illusion of knowing her when what he had observed had only been a shell, her human interface. She was ... not quite human, but not in the same way as he. She was a different breed of human. So this was the real Crystal Children. They might not have his powers, but they were certainly beyond the understanding of ordinary humans. Without telepathy, he would have been fooled like everyone else.

"To be continued" said Rachel, and they hurried back to class.

For the next weeks, Tormod and Rachel would spend at least the last half of lunch break just sitting quietly in a corner holding hands, not saying a word, only barely scanning the surroundings for trouble and otherwise lost in their own world. To anyone else they would look like a typical high school couple, but the reality was somewhat different. Rachel was systematically showing him her way of thinking, which she had been unable to share with anyone else because they were limited to words, music and drawings. Now she could show him her thoughts directly. And she did, at first chaotically, later more systematically. Or perhaps they just started to make sense to him because he gradually figured out her system. What had seemed to be a jumble of barely related concepts became a train of thought, but without words as its railroad that confined and defined where the thoughts could go.

He was not sure whether it was because of all this telepathy practice, but at some point he noticed that he could "hear" people's thoughts without touching them, if they were disturbingly close, around a meter or so. Most people were not that close, most of the time. While the bubble of personal space for Americans was a little closer than for Norwegians, the difference was not that big. So he would normally not be close enough to pick up people's thoughts unless they stood in line or there was some other compelling reason to be packed more closely than usual. Oh, and his closest neighbor in class, just barely.

Perhaps related to this, or perhaps not, he noticed that he could hear people speaking pretty far away. He had noticed this for the first time back when Jim ran off and talked with his friends, the ones who later became Tormod's friends as well. But the distance had only been like 6-8 meters. He could now hear clearly at 10-15 meters, including on the other side of walls. It was as if distance did not really begin to count inside that circle, he could hear a whisper as if he was right there. He did not hear every sound in that area as if it was right by his ear though, only those that interested him. Mainly if someone mentioned him, but also topics that interested him in particular.

Unlike the full telepathy, however, this "super-hearing" only worked when people actually spoke out loud. It just did not have to be as loud as before.

When he was holding hands with Rachel, however, there was little time to listen to people talking in the nearby rooms. She was sending her stream of consciousness so fast that even his considerable brain power was barely enough to receive it, much less analyze it. She did not really seem to care. Finally being able to undress her mind in front of another soul was enough for her. That was the closest impression he got of what she was doing. She was undressing her mind. She wanted him to see her heart naked, something no one else had been able to see before. They all saw only her surface, her human clothes, not the alien behind. But strangely, that alien part was her real humanity. Deep inside, inside even the unfamiliar way of thinking, was a core that was as living and as vulnerable as his own. She had the same fundamental needs as any human, they just took a very different form. And like any human, she had a thirst for company, a thirst to be seen and acknowledged. For 18 years, this need had never been filled. It was no wonder that she was desperately hungry for every second they could spend together.

It is warm and sweet yet fresh ... like a comfortably warm mint tea with plenty of honey, I guess ... and it just washes over you, wave after wave, from your hand and all over your body, until you are filled up. Then you are feeling clean and healthy and strong and full of energy, like your batteries were recharged somehow.

That was how his mother had described the feeling of Tormod's healing power back when he healed a head cold this past summer. The reason he suddenly thought of this was that he was called into the office of their homeroom teacher.

"I'll get straight to the matter" said his teacher, a barely middle-aged man of mainly European ancestry, like most of the teachers and most of the students and most of the people in the suburb, although there were also some Asians. "I am getting reports that you are behaving indecently with a girl also in my class."

"Indecently? You mean me and Rachel holding hands?"

"That is what we are being told, yes."

"With all due respect, I cannot imagine holding hands being indecent by any human standard. There is no nation or tribe in this world where parents and children will not hold hands, so how can that be indecent?"

"It is not so much the hand-holding itself, but the things it can lead to" said the teacher, now a little on the defensive. From his thoughts, he had expected the boy to be ashamed or at least self-conscious about it.

"But we are not that kind of people" said Tormod. "That is not why we are holding hands."

"Well, that may be what you think now, but such things tend to escalate over time."

And that was when he looked once again at his teacher's aura, and the shadowy patch that was his stomach ulcer. And suddenly he remembered his mother's words, and an idea entered his mind.

"Since you agree at least that touching another person's hand is not indecent, I ask for permission to shake your hand only once. I am not going to do anything indecent to you. I just want you to understand how I am different."

"Uh, this is irregular..."

"No, shaking hands with a student in your class is as regular as it can be. You cannot be expelled for doing it, but you just might get in trouble for refusing to do it. Unless you have a record of never shaking people's hands."

"Well, this better not be some kind of prank."

"It is as far from a prank as humanly possible, and then some." Tormod held out his hand, and his teacher reluctantly took it.

Opening his mind to the wizard energy, Tormod channeled it into pure bright healing, flowing from his hand through the teacher's hand and arm and into his chest and stomach. The man gasped in spite of himself as the pleasurable sensation washed over him. "What ... are ... you ..." he stopped, lost in the feeling until the healing was finished and the flow of energy stopped. Tormod let go of his hand.

"They call me a Crystal Child. They say that it is my mission to lift humankind to a higher level of energy. Perhaps now you can understand why people would want to hold my hand without any further desire than just staying like that."

The man was shaken. It was pretty clear that he had never experienced anything like this before.

"Just ... Just don't blame me if anything happens" he said.

"I won't" said Tormod. "I take full responsibility for this. Thank you for your understanding."

And with that, he bowed and left. The poor man would probably never know what happened to him, not even when he one day noticed that he had not felt his stomach ulcer for days or weeks.

Chapter 18: Teen yoga

"Uh, Marie?"

"Yes?"

"There's a shadow on your stomach aura today. Not something murderous, but you may want to not go jogging."

"Can you heal it?"

"Probably, but in that case you'll never know for sure that it was real. Perhaps I just made it up."

"Well, as long as I can go jogging, it doesn't matter whether you made it up or not? Besides, you are a Crystal Child, you would not willingly lie."

"That's what they say. Fine, I'll give it a try."

Marie started pulling up her shirt.

"Uh, as far as I know I can touch your skin anywhere and your body will conduct the healing energy to the point that needs it."

"I'm just making it easier for you."

"If you say so." There was something about the answer that seemed off. Tormod could not put the finger on it, so as he closed in, he tried to pick her mind. He felt some strange kind of ... anticipation? And she really exposed more than necessary. It seemed unlikely, but what he felt was ... not quite sexual, not the way he knew such feelings at least, but something in that direction. She seemed to enjoy this a little too much.

Well, there was nothing he could do about that, not by now. Next time perhaps he should enlist the help of Crys, he had a feeling his aunt would act a little bit different around her niece. But Crys wasn't in right now, so he steeled himself and laid his hands on Marie's stomach. Oh, she was definitely enjoying this, and that was before the healing even began. She actually gasped when the energy began flowing. And so did he, because he was still connected to her mind and could feel the delicious influx of energy. It felt very different from the other side, and his mother had at least not exaggerated. Tormod sent a thought of sympathy to the poor homeroom teacher. That must have been quite a shock.

"You know, Marie" he said quietly. "I know I look like I'm still 15, but I am actually 18."

"I know. Actually you are quite mature in some ways."

"Because I am not literally a child anymore, I have a sex drive much like any other young man. As such, I can be distracted by a woman's body. I am not literally made of crystal, after all. It does not drive me crazy, but it does distract me."

"That is only natural. You are incarnate now, after all. I know you are unfamiliar with living on this plane of reality, but your sex drive is part of life here. It is actually a gift that brings great joy to humans."

"And great sorrow and heartbreak."

"That too. Because humans are greedy and egotistical, they often focus only on their own joy and not on giving joy to others. We Star Children have come to show them a

better way, of selfless love and giving."

"Right? That's why I usually take care to only touch women by their hands, if at all, so that I can give them my healing as a pure gift, without mixing it with vibes of desire to receive anything."

"A desire to take what is not given is bad, very bad; but a desire to receive what is freely given is good."

"I'll keep that in mind when the time comes" he said quickly and hurried back to his room.

There had been something in her feelings at the time that he definitely thought was sexual or at least erotic. He was not quite sure what the difference between those two were, but he imagined "erotic" as more subtle, refined, cultured, and "sexual" as more action-oriented and baby-making oriented. His own sexuality was ... not quite "on/off", but it tended to escalate quickly if at all. Was it possible that women - or at least this one - had a much longer sliding scale of sexual arousal? Because when he first started out reading her mind, she seemed to already be more aroused than he was; then gradually became more of the same during their conversation, but quite slowly. Certainly more slowly than he, which was why he decided to get out of there. Better safe than sorry!

Tormod had never been completely a "free-range" kid; his mother had arranged her time so as to be able to spend plenty of time with him, since she was not only his only real family but also his only real friend. She might not have wanted that, but she picked up on it pretty quickly. He was not a kid who made friends easily, especially not in a village that was already set in its ways before he appeared as a stranger. At least he always knew that his mother was there for him.

But even so, this was ridiculous. He had always had hours of the day to himself if he so desired, trekking in the farmland and wilderness around the village, or just sitting in a corner reading a book while his mother was working at the computer. Here, any gap in the day planner larger than a few minutes was sure to be filled in by some "activity". Americans abhorred a vacuum, and not just in the sense that they actually had a small robot vacuum cleaner. They abhorred the gaps of unplanned, unproductive time. It was perfectly fine to sit for an hour and meditate. But to have an hour off, with nothing planned, nothing to do, that was pretty much unthinkable. The sisters were carefully scheduling the day not only for themselves and their daughter, but for him as well. Apart from the first couple days when they did not know him, and when their daughter insisted on putting everything else aside to play with his telepathy. After that, the free time kept getting hacked into pieces and carried away.

The school day was of course tightly scheduled. But even after he came home, the scheduling continued. Meals were carefully planned and flawlessly executed. His "host parents" (that would be Eileen and Marie) drove him to the petting zoo where their daughter already spent quite a bit of time. He found that he could pick up basic emotions from animals, at least furry ones, but nothing resembling cognitive thought processes. Well, no big surprise there. The botanical gardens were also a big favorite of

the New Age family, because, NATURE!! As someone who used to walk for kilometers alone surrounded by actual unmodified nature and nothing else, the irony was almost painful. On the bright side, some of the plants were really beautiful.

Later, his host family had signed him up for "teen yoga", which was pretty much what it sounded like: Introductory yoga for teens. No certificate of "child yoga" required. He was convinced that somewhere out there, someone was also running a child yoga class, but not even Crys was required to attend that. The teen yoga was not so bad, it was certainly less demanding than the self-defense training he had received a year and a half ago. It was good for building agility and also served as a proxy for meditation, so it really fit him pretty well. It might also have been relaxing if they had not for some reason made it co-ed. That was a terrible idea in Tormod's opinion: Having teen girls do all kinds of stretching and squirming did nothing to increase a boy's mobility, to say the least. It had to be embarrassing for the girls as well. Luckily most of them were fairly skinny, no doubt being New-Age vegetarians or more. Fruitarian perhaps. But not all: There were some fairly plump girls, and ignoring them was a constant mental struggle. Also, yoga pants. For teenagers. Why was that even legal?

More lately Tormod was attending an introduction to something called "Reiki", which was similar to his own healing except you were supposed to not need to actually touch the patient, only their aura. You use particular hand positions to channel the Rei-Ki, the Divine Life force or Heavenly Atmosphere or some such. Supposedly anyone could do this, but they had to learn the correct positions in the presence of a Reiki Master, who would eventually initiate them, in this case for a modest fee that was included in the admission price for the course. As you gained more almost-hands-on experience, you could take more courses and advance to eventually become a Reiki master yourself, getting paid (or not, if you so desired) to initiate others. The theory of the healing method seemed somewhat similar to his own, but he was not confident that he could actually heal people without touching them ever so slightly. He was also not confident that anyone else in the room, including the "master", could heal anyone in any other way than a sugar pill. Not that this was anywhere close to nothing, humans being what they were.

If nothing else, the Reiki theoretical system could form a great basis for his own pseudoscience, and an excellent camouflage for actually healing people. He decided to call his system "Tactile Reiki", from the Latin word for touch. He also noticed the beautiful illustrations which featured light in various colors surrounding or radiating from hands. He could do that. He would have to practice at home to make the lights subtle and brief enough to not provide photographic evidence or being seen repeatedly by skeptics, any of which would be risky. But if people told their neighbors that he had healed them, and that they had seen literal light spill from his fingers, they would definitely be even less likely to be believed than with healing only.

Tormod was definitely becoming more dextrous, whether it was because of the Teen Yoga or because of the alternate-universe Wizard-power flowing ever more strongly through his aura. Perhaps it was some combination? He was already holding back,

because everyone else in the room - except their instructor - was less dextrous and less skilled than he was. It was mostly for beginners, after all, although some seemed to have more than a passing familiarity with yoga already.

Among these were a girl who looked to be around 16. She was of the not too skinny sort which made him question the wisdom of having co-ed yoga. When she was stretching or bending, he found it harder than usual to maintain the inner calm and slow breathing that was supposed to go along with yoga. He hoped that his telepathy had not accidentally leaked again, when she came over to him one day after the session. She had been right beside him, which was good in the sense that it made it harder to "accidentally" look, but bad in the sense that he was aware of her all the time. Plus, she was probably within his sending telepathy range, which his mother had estimated to two meter in daily use. He could extend it a little if he concentrated, but not a lot, perhaps up to the double at best.

"Hi, I'm Cathy" she said.

"Tormod. It's a Norwegian name. I'm an exchange student from Norway."

"Wow, that sounds exotic. Where is Norway?"

"Northern Europe."

"Oh! That explains your eyes and hair. I had a friend with red hair once, her mother was from Scotland. It's around there, right?"

"Yeah, just a stretch of sea between. Not an ocean like getting here."

"How do you like it here?"

"It's OK. I am used to having lots and lots of nature around. You know, wilderness with trees and stuff like that. I have hardly seen any plant life here that has not been in a garden or something. Let alone wildlife."

"Ah, then you have not been to the right places. There are national parks within driving distance!"

"That's nice" he said. "I guess you're from the States? You speak like a native at least."

"Tee hee, yes, I was born in this state and has lived here all my life. I live half the time with my mom and half the time with my dad, but they live in neighboring counties so it is not a big deal."

"I hope you get along well then. Some parents have a hard time dealing with teenagers."

"Yeah, I'm fine. My mom is a bit strict but my dad is super laid-back, I can do pretty much whatever I want when I live there. Not that I'm doing anything outrageous. I guess I'm a fairly normal girl?"

"Well, if normal girls are good at yoga" he said. She was one of those he suspected of having practiced before this course, after all.

"I learned a bit from my mom. And I am in my school's gymnastic club. I was thinking about becoming a professional gymnast, but it seems a lot of work, and you have to be ridiculously thin. Which I am not, obviously!"

"No, you look very healthy" he said. "Not like a skeleton and not like a mound of lard."

"Definitely not a skeleton!" she giggled. "Not so sure about the other part."

"No, seriously, you just look, uh, feminine I guess."

"Really? Well, I guess I should take your compliments and run with them." She grinned.

"You don't need to run for my part. I am still curious as to why a girl like you would talk to a boy like me."

"Are you kidding? You are probably the best in here, except for the instructor."

"Is it that obvious?" he said.

She laughed at his disappointment. "You thought you could hide it? Not from someone who has practiced as long as I. Perhaps from the newbies."

"Ah, well. I guess it takes one to know one."

"Yes, it does. I've seen you look at me."

"Oh! Don't call the police on me! Please!" He tried to make it sound like a joke.

"Come on, we're the same age. Besides I meant I could see you were appreciating my technique."

"I was appreciating you alright. Any more appreciation and I would not be able to do the exercises."

"Are you flirting with me?"

"Perhaps a little bit? I am not sincere about it though. I mean, I am sincere about you looking good, but I wouldn't do anything more than appreciate you. I am just staying here for half a year more after all."

"That's a lot of time actually. I think we should exchange mail addresses and get to know each other better."

"I should have asked about that if I had dared."

"Tee hee." She pulled out an Algol phone and he pulled out his own, they picked the mail exchange function and held their phones together for a moment until the process was finished.

"There! Now we can hang out anytime" she said cheerfully.

"Yeah, if our calendars are not full-booked!" he replied.

This certainly was a likable girl, but what was the real reason she had talked to him? He wanted to know, if only to make sure his secret had not somehow been exposed. Good-looking girls don't just come over and talk to you! He concentrated and peeked into her mind.

As sometimes happened, he could feel her mind more open than just her surface thought at the moment. Good, now he could hear what she had been thinking.

'Wow, that went better than expected! He wasn't scary at all, it was like talking to a classmate! It is like he doesn't know how awesome he is, but that can't be true. You can't be that good and not know it. Especially since he went to so much trouble to hide it. My mom was right all along.'

Her mom was right? About what? He traced her association back, and saw her mother. WHAT? Her mother was ... the yoga instructor? Well, that certainly explained her skill. But what had she said about him?

'The red-haired boy has been looking at you quite a bit. It may be that he just enjoys looking at your butt...'

'Mom!'

'Or more likely he has noticed that you are better than you pretend, just like he is.'

Well, you are not hiding it as much as he is. You are just not doing your best, but he is actively holding back, as if he tries to hide his abilities. Not his skills, so much. He is learning very fast, but he is not particularly skilled yet. But he is incredibly strong, fast and agile for his age. Not a gymnast like you; I think he has spent years on some kind of martial arts. I can't place what type, though. Judo? Karate? Kung-fu? I can't place it, but he's good. He is crazy good. And he's noticed you. You should try talking to him, perhaps you can learn something.'

So, his hunch had proved right! They were targeting him, in a sense. He was at least partly exposed, although they seemed to have no idea that there was paranormal powers involved. Well, that was the way he was going to keep it.

Thanks to Algor Hangouts, Tormod could keep his mother updated for free as long as both of them had wireless Interweb access, or for cheap if using a mobile broadband data plan. The American versions of those were not cheap enough that he was comfortable with using video hangout, though. He preferred to use wireless for that, but of course there was wireless in the house where he lived. So as long as he did not speak too loudly, he could discuss anything with her, face to face.

"I'm glad you're making friends" she said after he told her about ther Cathy the Gymnastics Girl. "And I am not surprised that your best friends are girls, given your history with boys for the previous 15 years or so. I guess that will take its sweet time to get over. But please, please, for the love of all that is whole and goodly, don't make any babies in America! It will be extremely hard to retrieve them, and we - the world - cannot afford to have potentially super powerful semi-semi-demigods grow up in random places without proper guidance. This world is troubled enough as is."

"Mom, I am not making babies. Not even one baby. I am not even having sex."

"That's good, because I am pretty sure your powers can heal infertility."

"Actually, every single time until now that I have healed someone - and that is admittedly rare in itself - I have known and wanted and even tried to do so. I am not sure people can just draw healing out of me without my consent, or even without my active decision."

"The subconscious is treacherous. Don't underestimate it. The instinct to procreate is right after survival, and that's on a good day for survival. We descend in a direct line from people who have procreated, and before that vaguely humanoid apes who have procreated, and before that various furry, and before that scaly, critters for about 700 million years. With all due respect, making a conscious decision may not always be necessary. Sometimes it may be enough to not flee for your life."

"Mom, I always flee for my life from sex. Don't worry. I am not going to leave a rainbow-colored trail of superpowered babies in my footprints."

Chapter 19: New Age

OK, so not all their time was scheduled. In the evening, like almost all Americans, the family had the TV on, with its hundreds of channels. Thus it came to pass that, while Tormod was in the living room reading a book, Eileen was watching the TV and called out to her daughter: "Crys, come and look at this!"

Crys was in the kitchen and came running with a glass of juice in her hand. She stumbled in the doorway and just barely caught herself, but the glass slipped from her hand. Tormod saw it out of the corner of his eye and wanted to catch it before it hit the floor, but even with his speed there was no way he could ...

And then he felt it again. The familiar twinge of reaching out. The glass slowed down and stopped, hanging impossibly in the air, then moved to the table where he wanted it to be. He had grabbed it and moved it *with his mind!* He had no idea that he could do that!

"Tormod? Did you?"

I'm not ready for this!

Time cut off abruptly, then rewound to a minute earlier. He took a deep breath - time jump was the hardest power in terms of sheer energy use - then got up and walked to the kitchen. "Hi Crys. There's something coming up on TV that your mom will want you to see."

"Aight" said the girl, wherever she had learned that. She finished pouring her juice and sauntered into the living room. "What's it, mom?"

"Oh Crys! Perfect timing! You should see this!"

Knowing things a little in advance was a normal Crystal Child thing, if he understood this right. Snatching things in the air with your mind, not so much. It seemed up there with flying as a certified superpower. Although if it was anything like the rest of them, it was probably still at party trick level. The only power he had that was truly overwhelming was flight. Still, this seemed related somehow. If he could make other things fly as well, that was pretty overpowered. Why had he never noticed before? Was it because he had been so sure it was impossible?

In his room, he tried his "new" power on various objects. Furniture was a no-go, would not even budge. So not on the same scale as flying. Books worked fine though, and anything smaller, like a pencil. He could lift them and move them around reliably, much like he would have done with his hands. Lifting several small things was easy too, as long as he lifted them at the same time, in the same direction, as a group. He could lift something like 4 kilograms in total, it seemed. Anything more and it began to strain. So yeah, party trick level, or a little more. Not a superpower. No stopping bullets. No throwing cars. OK, hopefully he would not need that. This was not a superhero movie. He was a Crystal Child, not a demigod ... OK, not yet at least.

Moving several things simultaneously got rapidly trickier after two, probably because he was used to only having two hands. This was going to take some time and practice

getting used to. And moving a pencil to write in a book was about as effective as writing with his left hand. Which was kind of funny because he used both hands when typing, and he found typing easier than handwriting. So it was not a problem with the hand itself, but a matter of habit. Well, hopefully there would never be a situation where his life depended on writing neatly without using his hands! Being able to move things from a distance, however ... That just might make a difference one day.

December was a bit hectic. Tormod kept practicing his telekinesis - the ability to move things at a distance - and gradually became able to lift more than 7 kilograms without effort. He also practiced his "Reiki lights" from his hands and fingers until he was pretty happy with these as well.

Then there were midterms, such as they were. Most of the students did not really seem to care much, but then they rarely did, at least not about school. Coming from the competitive private Commercial High School of last year, Tormod felt like he had come back to middle school, if even that. Most of the kids here seemed to think of school as a prison or playground, depending on their mood and attitude. A storage place for teens rather than a place of learning. There were exceptions, but really none like the Strivers back at his previous school, and most were just drifting, as far as he could see. They had their interests, but these were only accidentally aligned with the school's education, usually not at all.

At one point during midterm tests, Tormod realized that he was now able to pick up thoughts from kids two meters away instead of just one. He was not sure whether that meant his sending radius had also increased, but he hoped not. Just in case, he took care to not think too intensely about anyone or stare at them. As for reading thoughts, that was not particularly helpful during tests, since everyone else was more likely to get their answers wrong. Well, except Rachel, and even then it was a tie. American history was the only class where he was not in the lead, and he was catching up even there. The kids had grown used to it and barely even commented on it anymore. Rachel and he were Crystal Children, of course they could do things that other kids could not. That just made them more outsiders, really.

After the tests, he noticed that his telekinesis precision was starting to catch up with the increase in strength; even his remote handwriting was improving slowly. But there wouldn't be time to practice it the next day: The planes home to Norway were about to go. He had bought Christmas gifts for his host family, but he was not going to celebrate the holiday with them. It was more than any other time of the year a time for family, both in Norway and America. And the tickets home had been waiting for a long time, ever since summer. His mother had made sure of that.

Getting from flight to connecting flight was always a mad scramble, and it probably did not help that he had accidentally caused the body scanner to malfunction at the first airport. It irritated him that people were put through humiliating procedures on a

national flight, and he mentally took out his frustration on the machinery, which promptly began frizzing. This caused the security people to get overly excited and spend time trying to fix it instead of doing their job, delaying the flight by ten minutes even though he stopped disturbing the machine almost immediately. He had not even known he could do that. It was, in all fairness, a rather small disturbance. He could probably not have shut it down even if he wanted to, and now he was glad he didn't.

Standing in line to get into the trans-atlantic flight, he scanned the minds of the not obviously Nordic looking passengers. Because while he neither liked nor trusted the airport security, it would still be disastrous to have the plane blown up over the Atlantic. He had kept thinking about this off and on during his trip westward, and he did not want to do that on the trip back. Not at a time like this. Luckily most of the passengers were clearly Scandinavians on their way home, whether from business or pleasure. He could trust these implicitly. Norwegians, Swedes and might be rivals, but in a brotherly way. They would not blow each other up, much less their own countrymen. Sure, there were anti-Islamists making threatening noises, comparing the government to Quisling (a Norwegian politician who betrayed his country to the Nazis during the second world war) because they let so many Muslim refugees settle in the country. There was talk about a clash of civilizations and an upcoming civil war; but it was all bark and no bite. No Scandinavian would sink so far as to commit terrorism. That was just unthinkable.

Luckily none of the other passengers seemed to harbor any dastardly plans either, so the plane trip ended up being quite uneventful. In the end, having gotten up at oh noes in the morning to reach the first flight, Tormod slept through most of the boring trip. When flying across America, he had at least been able to look down at the snow-covered landscape. Here, he was not even sitting by the window, and besides there was just sea and clouds and a sea of clouds.

Even after he landed safely on Norwegian soil, he still had a ways to travel to get home. And it was not the same stretch he had traveled to get from home to the airport less than half a year ago, because it was in a certain sense not the same home. This time he took the train up in the great valleys of Norway, and then a local bus to a village he did not know. At the bus stop however stood someone he did know, and the only person in the whole world who knew him for who he really was. Once upon a time he had felt too grown-up to hug his mom in public. Now he was grown-up enough to do so happily. They might celebrate Christmas in a home he had only seen in pictures, but as long as she was there, it was still home, and still Christmas.

Now that Tormod's grandmother had her legs and both arms, there was no need for her daughter to remain. Rannveig had gotten herself a job in one of the smaller municipalities up in the valley in the interior of the country, where the winter was longer and deeper and more people died or moved out than were born or moved in. Because of the change in the number of people, it had been possible for her to buy a small house at an affordable price. She had saved up money over the years for just such an occasion, which she knew was coming. The small blue house on the hillside was half snowed in, but it stayed warm enough for her and her son to celebrate Christmas and enjoy a few

days together after having been kept apart by an ocean.

As for his grandmother, Tormod learned that she had been reluctant to give up her disability pension, so she had not really told anyone that she was completely healed of her former affliction. She got groceries delivered to the door and never went anywhere for fear that people would discover that she no longer qualified for her pension. In this way, she was still locked up in a prison of her own making, suffering by choice rather than by fate. A "home helper" from the municipality came to do basic housework like cleaning the house, which she could have done herself, but did not dare to lest anyone discovered her improved condition. It was a bizarre situation, but then Tormod was getting used to bizarre things happening when he used his powers.

The more care did he take to not let anyone see him fly. But the house was practically in the wilderness, as were most houses around here admittedly. It did not take him long to get away from prying eyes and start zooming across the landscape. He was flying quite a bit faster than he did half a year ago; he would estimate the speed to almost 30 kilometer per hour, or the speed of pretty fast pedal biking. It was kind of exhilarating, although the wind speed meant he had to frequently use his heat power to keep himself warm. Flying was something he had missed, and was going to miss a lot, even more now that it was faster and therefore more fun. There would not be much chance to fly in California, with all the people and with the full-booked schedule his "aunts" set up for him.

And unfortunately, it was not long before he had to go there again. Well, it was not a bad place. People respected his healing and the occasional mind-reading after all, which was rare here. Of course not everyone did, but there were enough of them that he was not seen as The Crazy Boy. So it was probably better than going to high school here, in that regard. But only seeing his mother on a small phone screen was a bit of a downer. Not that he had an oedipus complex or anything, but for the time being at least, she was the only human he could trust fully. The only person with whom he could be himself. The only place he did not need to hide who and what he was. The only home where he did not need to think before thinking.

Once back in California, Tormod agreed to get signed up to new Reiki classes. The price was not too extreme; this varies from teacher to teacher, although traditionally the final step to Reiki Master is far more expensive than the beginner classes. Reiki practitioners are not jealous: Their fondest wish is that everyone on Earth be Attuned to the Reiki and radiate a healing light to themselves and others, lifting the whole planet to a higher level of spirituality. Well, so it is said. Since any person can be Attuned to Reiki, it may happen that some people later fail to immerse themselves in its mysterious atmosphere and get free from their selfish delusions. But by and large, Reiki practitioners are not overly worried about competition. At least these were not.

Once you have been Attuned in the presence of a Reiki Master, you have the Reiki. Practice and a pure, virtuous life can improve your ability, but taking more Attunement of the same level can also expand and deepen your power, so is recommended for beginners. Reiki level 2 is more advanced, with new symbols and practices such as

distance healing. Since Tormod had zero or near zero belief in the actual popular Reiki, he very much doubted that he would be able to distance heal any more than pure placebo effect. That might not be nothing or close to nothing in itself, but there were others who could provide that. For the time being, he just wanted to formalize and embellish his existing ability. With literally thousands of Reiki practitioners around the globe, rumors of one who actually worked would not trigger the CIA to a red alert, presumably. Of course, if he waltzed in and emptied a hospital, that might do it. But since healing always took some energy out of him, even when he succeeded, there was little risk of emptying even a doctor's waiting room.

So for the time being, Tormod took a Level 1 Reiki class for students who were already attuned. It meant they could skip the basic introduction to Reiki and focus more on practical applications and deepening their understanding. Also, practice, although that did not come up at the very start. So he still had a bit time to to practice at home.

The yoga classes also continued. Cathy had called him up a few times for Algol hangouts, the first couple times along with a couple friends but later alone. She was half shy, and he missed being able to read her mind sometimes to find out what she really meant. He could not read minds over the Interweb, unfortunately! But once they met at class again, he could. However, she did not have time to stay and talk a lot, just briefly before and after practice. He could still not sense any malicious intent from her, only a curiosity she tried to hide. As if curiosity was a problem. It was not, as far as he was concerned. Of course, it would have been kind of hypocritical if he had a problem with other people's curiosity while he was reading their mind. That said, he had to take care to protect himself, as his mother so often told him. "The world ends with you" she would sometimes say.

But whatever Cathy really wanted, she seemed satisfied with meeting him at the yoga classes and occasionally hanging out online for a little while, just chatting. In that way, she reminded him of Unni from last year. She would talk about random things that could not possibly mean much to him, but just being able to talk with him about them seemed to make her happy. He was not sure how that worked. He was not like that. If he spent time with someone, it was usually because he wanted something or they wanted something. Not just talking to talk. But evidently some people were different. Well, at least he could now assure his mother that he was highly unlikely to spawn any babies with Cathy, whether he wanted to or not!

P.E was ... difficult for Tormod. It had been difficult all through his childhood, but back then it was because he was small and weak and slow and clumsy. He got a lot of attention then, but not in a good way. The other boys enjoyed taunting and bullying him mercilessly. Now, the tide had turned. He had the speed and stamina of an olympic athlete. His mother had tested him when he was home, and there was no doubt about it: These qualities were approaching the borderline of the humanly possible. By now, he could easily get the attention he had craved: Being number one, the hero of the team, the best of the best. But he could ill afford that kind of attention. Being a world famous athlete was not his destiny.

And so he had to hold back, always hold back. His strength and agility were not record-busting to the same degree; not yet, at least. But he still knew he could match the best in his class, if he let himself use his full strength. That would place him in the top ten for the school, pretty much, because one of the guys in his class was pretty good. The other boy however had the looks to match. Tormod was sinewy at best, not bulky at all. Benchpressing on the level of his ox-like classmate would be a world sensation. The world did not need that kind of sensation. And he did not need that kind of attention. That did not mean there was not a part of him that craved it. But he knew better. He had to hold back, always hold back. And he had to make it look natural. His yoga instructor had seen through him; his P.E teacher must not. The fate of the world was in the balance, if worst came to worst.

So he never gave his all. He always kept an eye on the other boys. He had a couple healthy but not amazing boys that he used to calibrate his own speed and strength. He never allowed himself to do much better than them. They were better than average, and he came across as perhaps slightly better than them, but not in the running for a sports scholarship or anything like that. It helped that he did not really have much liking for that kind of career. As a child, he had dreamed of it occasionally. But now, he found it to be filled with people he did not want for friends. Well, the best of the best might be friend material, if they had time. They had the drive, the inner strength and will to make sacrifices for what they truly desired. But overall, the jock milieu was not one in which he would immerse himself if he could avoid it.

It was the pain of always holding back, always hiding, never being able to be himself ... It was this that bothered him. It was this that made him wish he could just cut loose. But then, hiding was his life now. As a "Crystal Child", he had the privilege of reading and sending thoughts with a select few "Indigo Children" and other New Age believers. That was more than he could safely do in most of the world. This was California, and the most New Age part of that state again. There were so many people claiming to heal and read thoughts and know the future, no one would investigate a high school boy who was said to do the same thing. After all, there were always kids who did not get over their 8th grader syndrome until adulthood, if even then. Boys and girls who dressed in black and recited stilted poetry to their beloved Mistress Death, or tried to summon demons in carefully drawn circles and pentagrams with candles and holy words. No, he was as safe here as anywhere in the world. As long as he held back. Ever day, every hour, every moment someone saw him or someone might be seeing him somehow from somewhere.

Chapter 20: Chrystal spectrum

Part of the Reiki course for the already Attuned was practicing Reiki on themselves and each other. Yes, one of the appeals of Reiki is that you can use it on yourself. Because of this, many sick people sign up for learning Reiki. (Well, it is not literally called learning, but "Attuning", but you do learn the basics too). If they don't find any effect at all from their self-Reiki, they may have lost a small amount of money on a basic course, but by American health cost standards, it is so small as to be hardly worth suing over. Besides, there are all kinds of disclaimers and such.

But if the Reiki seems to help even a little (and it usually does, thanks to the placebo effect) then the sick people will be back, trying to expand their Reiki with new courses and more Attunement. In addition come all the people who want to heal a chronically ill family member, and those who just want to make the world a better place. And then there are people like this guy.

Tormod's first partner for mutual Reiki was a guy in his 30es. Tormod scanned the other's mind to find out the best approach. What he saw surprised him. He had expected everyone here to be a believer, but this guy was not. It was not that he was here to expose the Reiki hoax or anything like that. He did not even actively disbelieve. He just didn't care. He was taking courses for his resume as a Reiki healer, and it did not matter to him whether it was magic or placebo or just empty rituals. As long as his future customers more than paid for his current expenses, it was a good way to bolster your household budget at a time when raises were a pie in the sky. So, as long as he went through the motions and got paid, it was all fine. Whether it worked was up to the Reiki, if it existed.

Luckily, the guy did not have any serious illnesses himself, known or unknown. He was not in perfect health: He did have trouble with back pain occasionally, and it was likely to increase with age, due to his bad posture and lack of regular exercise. But it was nothing he couldn't live with, and Tormod decided to let him. He could have healed him, probably. It had worked on Marie, after all, and the boy with the cold. But he could not heal the guy without being discovered. The pure, sweet warmth of the healing energy was not something you would forget quickly. It would disturb his worldview, and the mental disturbance from that might be worse than the occasional back pain. If he started acting too weird, he might lose friends or even his job or family. It was better to heal those who were already weird. There would surely be some of those in the future. So for now, Tormod too only went through the motions. He had those down pretty well. Their residing Reiki Master went around and observed, and he seemed happy enough. That was all that counted, at least for this man. Tormod had bigger plans, but not for today.

'I am not a Crystal Child.' Usually when they were holding hands, Rachel would just

start sending her particular jumble of thoughts. It was not really a jumble to him anymore. He had gradually begun to see patterns in it that were quite different from those of ordinary language and emotion. A kind of shortcut links that connected many concepts in ways most people could not see. He felt that he understood her better than many people understand their friends, but there was still so much more to know, after less than half an hour, five days a week, for less than half a year. But today, she did not follow the usual routine, which was in itself unusual. Instead, she thought this. He was not yet ready to tell her that neither was he, so he just waited.

'I saw this on the Interweb. This is me.' She showed him memories of an article she had read. *AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER. 'I have many of the traits listed there, and no Crystal Child traits that are not listed. I can't heal people like you can. I can't read thoughts, except yours. I am actually worse than other people at knowing what others think. I am not spiritual. It is all a lie.'*

'You could be both.'

'No. I only have the Crystal traits that happen to also be autism traits. If I had read this before I met you, I would have said there are no Crystal Children. But you are.'

'Not exactly. Well, I do have these powers that you know of, but not because of crystals. I inherited them from my father. He was from another world.'

'That sounds like another lie, but you have the powers. So it may be true.'

'I have read my mom's mind, and she certainly believes it. She remembers it like that.'

'Then, Crystal Children is a misunderstanding. Autism spectrum like me mixed with aliens like you.' She thought it so matter-of-factly, without judgment. So what if he was an alien, she seemed to say, he was the same person as he had been before he told her.

'And you are the same person as you were before you read that. You may not be literally a Crystal Child, perhaps no one is, but you are precious to your family. You don't just have a disorder. Your mind is not disordered, it is just ordered in a different way. You have a beautiful mind. I have learned new ways of thinking from you. Because of this I can sometimes think faster and more precisely, and often see things from different angles, the one I learned from my mother and the one I learned from you. Because you have invented your own way of thinking, you are a truly awe-inspiring person. What more can be required to be a Crystal Child, than having invented a whole new mode of thought and shared it with another?'

'If I had not met you, I would have been broken now. Because you chose to know me and still accept me, I can believe that I am as good as a human. To you as an alien, it makes no difference, does it?'

'I am only half alien, I think. But yeah, you are human to me, only a different human, but an awesome one. If I survive to adulthood, I will likely live for hundreds of years, with your thinking helping me to see the world more clearly. You have given me the greatest gift since my mom gave me life and my dad gave me these powers.'

'Do you want to have sex with me?' She flashed him images and feelings of that direction. Now that was out of the blue. Had he thought anything that could be taken that way?

'I like you, but I would not ask for such a thing. Besides, I dare not sleep with anyone. My mother got pregnant in one try even though it was a week off her normal cycle.'

Somehow my race has the power to procreate more easily, even heal infertility. And I can pass through walls, so likely my sperm can pass through hindrances too.'

'You can pass through walls?'

'In a pinch.'

'You know me so well, but I don't know you so well.'

'That's because I have to hide to not be killed, because I am a half-alien. You only have to hide to not become a patient, someone stamped with the SICK PERSON stamp. It is bad, but you can move away from it if you move far enough. I cannot move away from death.'

'Fair enough. And because of you, I am not afraid. I know I am human too, only a bit different.'

The woman Tormod partnered with in the next Reiki session was almost the exact opposite of the guy from last time. As before, he read her mind (aided by some vague comments to make her think back) and found that she was learning Reiki because of her daughter, who had a chronic illness. She had no interest in getting paid for anything, and little enough in healing for herself. Her only big concern was for her child. It was almost heartbreaking to realize the poor woman was paying for this fantasy healing, but then again you should never underestimate the placebo effect. If the belief of your doctor can decide whether your drugs work as expected, then what about the belief of a parent? Tormod decided to do what he could to shore up that belief.

Special care had to be taken to not let random people see his light effects. He had tested them at home for weeks under different light conditions. In addition to keeping the light from his fingers and palm so faint as to be barely visible, he also placed himself between it and nearby possible observers, just in case. The next challenge was to make sure *she* noticed. In fact, he had to do it a few times before he saw her eyes widen in absolute surprise.

"That light..." she said, staring at his hand.

"You could see it?" He let the glow fade.

"So I really saw that? It was like a faint light shining from your fingers."

"I can see other people's auras, but they usually cannot see mine. Do you have a particularly strong attunement?"

"No, I don't think so. I always try ... But I don't see much progress."

"Well, it is not always possible to see right away. Anyway I am sure your daughter will feel the love you have for her."

"You know?"

"About her condition? Nobody has told me, and I have not read it anywhere. Sometimes I know things. It can be handy, it can be disconcerting. Once in a blue moon it can be tragic. But I do not resent it."

"This is so incredible ... I was starting to think that perhaps I was being scammed, that this was just some kind of hoax being played on gullible people..."

"Well, as I said, at least your love is real. Love may not literally be all we need, but it is a big part of it, don't you think so?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. This is incredible."

"OK, let us continue the practice."

The woman herself did not have any serious health problems beyond what you would expect of pretty much any woman her age: Haemorrhoids and "armor shoulders", where the muscles of the shoulder and neck were stiff, hard and painful from being held up during a stressing workday.

In Reiki, you are not supposed to actually touch the other person, but just hold your hands just over their skin and let the energy pass from your hands to them. But while moving his hands close to her neck, Tormod "accidentally" made contact, and the spark of healing energy jumped from his fingertips to her body, rapidly spreading across her shoulders and neck. She gave a small gasp as she felt the energy, but the gentle warmth soon spread across her shoulders, giving her instant relief.

"It works, it really works when you do it!" she exclaimed. "My shoulders became better in a few heartbeats."

"That is known to happen, but I still have my problems. It seems my healing energy cannot flow freely without skin contact. It should be able to transmit through the light radiating from my hand, but I am not very good at that."

"I don't think anyone will mind as long as they get better" said she. She was probably right about that. Having felt her concern for her child, he kind of wished he could have followed her home and healed her child. But that was not socially acceptable. Besides, it was far from certain that he could heal something like that. What he had healed so far were damage and weak viruses. Was it even possible to heal a condition someone was born with? He was not sure, but he was pretty sure it was not possible for someone like him, who felt a bit drained from curing a common cold.

The range of Tormod's mind reading had expanded lately. Perhaps it was the practice. Perhaps it was just his power growing, as his mother had told him they would. It was not like being a semi-demigod came with a user's manual or anything.

The main reason he notice the greater range was that two particular classmates were now within the radius where he would pick up thoughts that concerned him in particular without actively listening for them, at least some of the time. These two classmates were particular in very different ways, but they were both distracting.

One was a girl who was part of his clique, and a nice enough girl in general. But she was sitting in such a way that she had a good view of his bright red hair, and she seemed to notice it and think about it whenever she did not have anything better to do, or at least several times a day. He had stopped dying his hair toward the end of the last school year, so that the roots were just showing when he came home. By the end of summer he had cropped his hair short, getting rid of the brown. It was now growing out again in its natural color, but of course everyone thought that he was dying it, and he had heard some comments about it, not all of them positive. But he was fed up with hiding such a trivial thing.

He had been prepared for some criticism and weird looks. He had not been prepared for an otherwise sane girl staring intently at his hair and imagining running her fingers

through it, ruffling it and playing with it. Day after day. And it seemed to be one of those weird in-between things that were not exactly sexual but also not exactly not. Given that she was not his mother or sister or lover, he was not convinced that she was entitled to play with his hair. And neither was she, because despite her elaborate fantasies about it, she never said anything or tried to do anything to him for real. She also didn't fantasize about playing with other parts of his body or the other way around, although she would look him over with some regularity as if to verify that he still looked the same. But as far as looking at the opposite sex, this did not really qualify, not by boy standards. It was still kind of distracting though, in a weird way. Kind of like the sound of someone yawning loudly in class. It is not exactly *wrong*, but it is kind of wrong even so.

Now, the other distracting person was not being playful at all. He was being hateful, and that was even more distracting. Bobby the Bad Bully had not forgotten, as it turned out. Perhaps he was the type of people who just don't forget when they feel slighted. And Bobby definitely felt slighted. He saw Tormod as an aspiring stage magician using tricks to bully *him*.

Tormod had tricked him using ventroli ... ventrilo ... doll talking tricks that made Bobby hear things the others did not, and as a result they had thought he, Bobby, was hearing voices in his head! His best friend had even tried to make him go to the school nurse that day.

Then when Bobby had cornered him in the boys' room, he had used some kind of trick to make himself invisible and slip out of there. How he had done it was not important. The important thing was that he had made Booby look the fool again. Nobody believed what had really happened, they looked at him like he was either crazy or making things up. Nobody did that to Bobby and got away with it.

The problem was that it was impossible to get Tormod alone. He was always hanging out with his friends. They were all weak cowards and girls, but they were like ten weak cowards and girls in his class alone, and more elsewhere. And they all treated the skinny little magician like he was their long lost brother. Bobby was big and brawny and badass, but going up against a wall of people was still a bit over the top. People who are weak alone gain an unreasonable amount of confidence when there are enough of them together. It is like a predator going up against a batch of herbivores. If they don't panic so you can hunt down the slowest, the whole project is hopeless. And this guy was not the slowest. He was the leader of the pack, such as it was. Attacking him in front of the rest would not work, because he was not going to run away, and then they wouldn't either.

Bobby had talked this over with his friends. If they ganged up, even if they were a little fewer, they could easily take down that flock of sheep. But they were not willing to do it for him. That hurt. What was friends for if they would not support you when your honor was at stake? But even his best friend had told him: "So you underestimated him. He was new and you did not know that he was some kind of bigwig for the New Age kids. Deal. It is not like he stole your girlfriend or anything. You picked on him and he outsmarted you once or twice. It happens, man. Nobody wins life with a full score." That was easy to say when you were not the one getting tricked. He would have his revenge, someday, somehow. Just looking at the smug kid made his blood boil.

Chapter 21: Norwegians don't date

Tormod's third Reiki partner was different from both the previous. It was a woman around the age of 40 with breast cancer. She was undergoing chemotherapy and felt terrible for days on end, then life was livable for a little while and then back to purgatory with the next treatment. Her reason for Attuning to Reiki was to be able to heal herself, and get healing from other Reiki practitioners, ideally Reiki masters. But anything that could possibly save her life and make the chemo tolerable.

Tormod did not have any problem with her attitude. It was a desperate situation, and he was not sure he could have focused on loving and healing others when his life was at stake and he was feeling terrible. He had been sick a lot, but rarely feeling as bad as she did even now - and this was not one of her worst days, because she could not come here on her worst days. Reading her mind was painful in itself, as if her malaise tried to enter his body through the link.

The worst part was knowing that the cancer was still there. And he was the one who knew that for sure, not she. He could see the tumors as small black whirlpools in her aura, darker than any sickness he had seen before. But when the time came to treat her and he slowly passed his hands over the body, his X-ray vision could not really pick out the tumors, so small were they, and so similar to ordinary small clumps of cells. He had to look back and forth from her aura to the X-ray to see them. No wonder the surgeons had not been able to get rid of them all - some of them were smaller than the head of a needle. The hope was that the toxins would kill them off, and hopefully they would, but they had not succeeded yet, that much was clear.

Her eyes widened when she saw the faint glow from his fingers, but she did not say a word or show in any other way that she had seen something impossible. Her heart beat faster, though, he could see that. His X-ray vision had a range of about 40 cm now, so there was really no part of her he could not see if he held his hand near. But near was not going to be enough to actually make a difference. He gently touched her skin and poured as much of his healing into her as he could.

It was not enough. The bright healing energy flowed around the blackness of the small tumors, but did not dispel them. As far as he could see, nothing happened to them. The tissues that had been damaged by the chemo were being restored heartbeat by heartbeat. Repairing raw damage had always been the easiest for him, from the day he first got that kick in his shin. Even before he could heal the common cold, he could heal damage. He had healed a more than ten year old damage to sensitive nerve fibers in his grandmother, but then admittedly they were blood relatives and he knew her well; perhaps that helped. Now the soft tissues of this woman's skin and lungs and digestive tract repaired themselves, absorbing the healing energy. But while the reddish shadows of the damage dissolved in the healing energy like soft clay in a stream, the tumors remained like black pebbles, unchanged in any way as far as he could see.

She waited until he was finished, then thanked him. "That was fantastic!" she said. "I

feel as good as new!"

He hung his head. "Unfortunately, you are not as good as new. There are six small tumors that I could not banish."

She stared. "You know? Has anyone told you?"

He shook his head. "I don't know if anyone else here knows. I can see things. It is a gift. But even though I could see them, I could not remove them."

"But I feel fine!"

"Yes, I restored the rest of your body from the damage of the chemo. The toxins attack any cells that divide rapidly, whether cancer cells or those of your own body. I could restore the cells of your body without restoring the cancer cells. But they are still alive, and this is the limit of what I can channel. I am sorry."

"I see." She looked pensive for a moment. "So they did not get it all. I lost both of them and they still did not get it."

"That's what the chemo is for, I guess."

"I see. Well, there will be more chemo then. Can I come back here and you can fix me up again like this? Perhaps if I have enough chemo, the darned thing will shrivel up and die and I won't. Until now, we've *both* shriveled up. So this is still a big deal for me."

"Yeah, just talk with me before or after the session, and I will try to ... channel the Reiki. I am not a miracle worker, you know. I am just ... Attuned to a healing energy."

"Well, it is the best thing that has happened to me in quite a while. So I'll take what I get."

"And I'll give what I can."

Then, unexpectedly, she hugged him. There were tears in her eyes. He did not feel too good himself either.

February gave way to March. The first interesting thing that happened this month had nothing to do with powers or wizardry: Tormod's mother agreed to let him buy a new smartphone! The old one was getting seriously long in the tooth by the standards of the day. The operating system was not even being upgraded on it anymore, and there were so many new functions and so much more power in the new big phones, or mini-slates as they were called, often shortened to "mites". One mainstream article, in Time Magazine, used the phrase "The Mighty Mite" about these new wonders. All pretense to being just augmented phones was gone, although the early models had sometimes been called "phablets" (phone tablets) and the word was still in use by some. But "mighty mites" had mostly out-competed "fabulous phablets" in common use.

It was still possible to make ordinary calls with most of the mites, but who in their right mind would do that when you could have a text, voice or video hangout with one or more other people for free using WiFi, or for cheap using wireless broadband? Gogool had added a function to their Algol operating system that let their mites use otherwise secured WiFi at homes and workplaces, if the owner allowed, in exchange for a small compensation to the owner. So the more mite owners who used your WiFi, and the more they used it, the less it cost you. As a result, cities and suburbs were increasingly

blanketed by WiFi with a Gogool account built-in to the server software, and you had to drive into the countryside before you depended on wireless broadband.

Tormod still had the ability to commune with computers, if he could get alone with them. Freezing in place would weird people out, and at school he just did not dare. But influencing computers directly with his mind required total concentration, so he could not do it while keeping track of the outer world. The two realms were just too different. But alone in his room, he would use his mite to log on to the Interweb, and navigate there at amazing speed, freed from the need to use cumbersome screen keyboards. He wasn't really any better at it than he had been last year, but he wasn't any worse either, and with the new hardware it was even faster and more fun than before.

Tormod continued to attend the weekly Reiki gatherings. He continued to heal those who already believed in Reiki (and so presumably would not believe in him), if he felt that they needed it. But in addition, he kept an eye out for Amanda M, the woman with the breast cancer. Each time she had been to chemotherapy, she would show up dog sick and he would heal her in the name of Reiki, before the gathering even started. The small black swirls of cancer were shrinking for each treatment, but not fast. There was still the risk that the cancer might develop resistance to the toxins used, or that the doctors would end the treatments before the cancer was dead and gone. And of course, there was the risk that he would have to go home to Norway before the cancer was gone. Hopefully she would be able to endure the horrible side effects on her own: Most people did, after all. But he would never be able to tell her for sure, in that case, whether the cancer was finally beaten.

Another slightly disturbing thing, if somewhat different, was that someone had outed him as a healer. Not in the press, thank goodness, but among the participants at the Reiki gathering. When he was about to leave, and had already left the room where they had been, a woman in her 40es hurried up to him. She explained that she had heard that his Reiki was particularly strong, and it so happened that she had this back pain that she had not been able to get rid of even after weeks of Reiki.

Tormod was not particularly surprised by the affliction. With breasts like that, back pain was to be expected. It is rare in this life to get anything for free, and with weapons of mass disruption like those, there was definitely a price to be paid. Still, he checked her aura to see that it was not something else. The mother of a classmate had been to the doctor for back pains several times, and it turned out to be cancer of the pancreas. Kidney stones could also give back pain. He was not sure whether he could do anything about kidney stones, but his record of fighting cancer so far was Cancer 1, Tormod 0.

Luckily his first guess was right. Or at least it was ordinary skeletal muscle pain, not anything more sinister.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

She nodded eagerly.

"Then keep this a secret." He held up his hand, and manifested the faint light from his palm and fingers. She stared in awe. If she ever told any nonbelievers about this, they would close their ears at this point. He ran his hands close to her body a few times

before finally touching her arm, sending his healing energy coursing through her body. Would he ever be able to heal people without actually touching them? It was kind of embarrassing. At the very least he wish he could heal them through their clothes. But for now, this was what he had.

"Thank you!" she said when she had taken a couple steps and stretched and verified that the pain was completely gone. "Oh, thank you so much!"

"Hush, remember, it's a secret. Besides, shouldn't we thank the Reiki? I just happen to be an unworthy vessel." He seemed to remember having heard that phrase, unworthy vessel, somewhere. Or was that unworthy vassal? English is a language difficult. The lady seemed happy enough though, wandering off. If she kept her breasts - which she hopefully would since there was no sign of cancer anywhere in her aura - the back pain would return at some point. But hopefully not for a year or two. And by then he would be far away.

Tormod continued to attend the Teen Yoga, and Cathy continued to talk with him each time. She was likable enough, but as was often the case with girls, he had no clue as to what she wanted except for hearing the sound of her own voice and his. Americans were even more like this than Norwegians. They would treat you like you were their best friend, but unless they were going to ask you for money, it was anybody's guess what they really wanted. As far as he could guess, they were just friendly out of politeness, but this one was it to him in particular, and she just kept it up.

Finally after their last session before Easter (which was particularly early this year, in late March) she told him: "My mother tells me there is gender equality in Norway."

"Yeah, more or less. We don't look the same or act quite the same, but there is nothing we think a man can do that a woman can't do, except make another woman pregnant."

She giggled. "So girls in Norway ask boys out, for instance? On dates and such?"

"No, never heard of that."

"Oh."

"Never heard of a boy asking a girl on a date either, although I see it on foreign TV and in games. I think dating is not something Norwegians do with Norwegians."

"You don't? How do people get together then? I mean, together like in getting engaged and married and stuff."

"They usually fall in love with friends and coworkers and friends of friends and friends of coworkers and so on. People they meet anyway."

"Yeah, but once they have met them, how do they get from there to knowing whether they should go further?"

"They just get to know each other better. They talk together, hang out with shared friends and talk about things they can talk about in front of others. Once they have done that, they have a pretty good idea whether they want to talk about things they can't talk about in front of others. The idea of going alone with someone you don't really know, even in a public place, seems a bit creepy to most of us, I think. Boys as well as girls."

"That's weird. What if they don't have any shared friends?"

"Then they probably don't meet in the first place. Norwegians would not want to marry some random person they meet on the street. They may want to go to bed with them, if they are the type who will bed people on impulse and forget about it. But that's not how you get married, usually. It is a special type of people who live like that. They don't like marriage and they usually don't like kids. Most people do things the way I said first. They get to know each other as friends and then they just click, or grow together or something."

"Ah. That's different from here, I think. I mean, here we would do that but then the guy would ask the girl out."

"I have heard about that. Dinner and a movie, or was it the other way around?"

She giggled. "It does not need to be super fancy. Teens will often go for a burger or pizza or something like that. Just somewhere they can be together without all their friends hanging around."

"OK. I've seen in anime, they often go browse shops together and buy some kind of thing to remember, eat cakes and see a movie or go to an amusement park. But then, in anime I've seen people *fly*, so."

She laughed. "I think I'd prefer cakes over flying."

"I had a hunch that you were that kind of person."

"Well, then, I guess I'll see you next time?"

"I guess so too. If you want to."

Cultural exchange is great, but he still had no idea why she was asking him in particular. The chance of her moving to Norway and wanting to date any of the locals seemed very slim - she seemed happy enough with her homeland, as far as he could see. And so was he. Being able to practice his healing now and then, discreetly, was OK. But he could probably do that in Norway too, if he found people who were as gullible as here. Even Norwegians could be surprisingly ignorant about basic things.

In the first week of April, there was a New Age convention within driving distance. AstralCon did not actually take place on April Fools Day, and the local New Age crowd seemed to take it seriously enough. Tormod had a particular reason why he wanted to go: There were supposed to be a couple high-ranking New Age people there, authors and speakers. His observation and the occasional mind-reading so far had led him to categorize the New Age crowd here as "sheep", that is to say, they might have joined the flock with some individual reason once if they were not born there, but now they mostly followed the others without too much self-reflection. What Tormod wanted to know was whether their leaders were shepherds, or wolves.

So far he had gotten the opportunity to read the mind of the so-called "Reiki Master" who ran the Attunement sessions. He seemed to be a nice enough guy, and less blatantly materialistic than the common business-oriented guy Tormod had refrained from healing earlier this season. But despite his "Master" title, he was still very much a sheep type. He was not consciously aware that the people who surrounded him did so because they were painfully gullible, and so he did not feel a responsibility for them, nor did he think of himself as exploiting them or using them for his own gain. He had gone the

grades himself and practiced, and people had told him they felt better. So basically he was a "Master" in the sense of a "Master's Degree", having worked toward the necessary milestones until he now was initiated to convey the Reiki to others. Even if he could not see or feel anything amazing, as long as he went through the rituals, the Reiki would work if the receiver was open to it.

It seemed unlikely to Tormod that the entire New Age movement was made up of gullible people without anyone doing their best to part the fool from his gold. And if there are wolves, there may also be shepherds, people who know that the masses can't lead themselves in the right direction, and so they step in to protect them from the worst predators and channel their headcount toward useful or at least harmless goals. He could imagine himself being such a shepherd at some future time. And if there were others like him on Earth, this would be a good place to look for them. But a bit cautiously: Even if they were not twisted into evil by some unfortunate circumstance, they were not going to enjoy being exposed. He would have to be more careful than usual.

Chapter 22: Fake crystal vs fake crystals

The first thing that struck Tormod was the sheer size of the convention area, and still it was teeming with people. He had not expected anything remotely like this. Thinking it over, it made more sense: California alone had a population of almost 40 million, more than all the Nordic countries together at a bit over 25 million.

He had read once that some 4 million Americans claimed to have had direct contact with space aliens, as in being abducted by aliens, or communicating with them, or meeting them face to face. Not all of those lived in California, of course, but the state probably had more than its fair share of them. And then there were the people who remembered past lives (with a little help from a specialized "regression therapist", usually) or communicated with the dead or could see them with some regularity. The people who could see auras. The people who healed or got healed by crystals. The people who predicted the future using crystal balls, tarot cards or any other non-scientific means and actually believed in it. Dragons and elves unfortunate enough to be born in a human body. So the certified nuts were probably in the millions in this state alone, let alone all the curious people. Now he wondered why the convention area was smaller than a city!

In all fairness, this was not a general gathering for all kinds of New Age and quasi-science people. As the name AstralCon implied, it kind of specialized in the more subtle aspects such as auras (including Reiki), astral travel (out of body experiences) and the afterlife before reincarnation. And crystals, of course. There were to be lectures, panels, interviews and book signings. Then there was the commercial aspect, with sales of books and videos and CDs, and of course crystals, always crystals. As a "Crystal Child", he was supposed to have an interest in those. Well, he had read up on mineralogy on the Internet so he could tell the various forms of crystals apart reasonably well. Their auras and vibrations less so, but luckily the experts were feuding about those, so his guess was probably as good as anyone's.

His main goal, however, was to get within range of some VIP. They were unlikely to shake hands with a nobody like him; but if he concentrated, he could usually read people's minds at a distance of over 7 meters, although it was only within around 4 meters that he would casually pick up the thoughts of people without even trying, if they thought about him or noticed him in any way. Getting within 7 meters of someone who was not a likely candidate for assassination seemed like a realistic goal. He did not even need to be in the same room, as long as he knew who they were and pretty much exactly where. Of course, the black horse in this race was if there were other semi-demigods here, or worse, actual demigods in disguise. That could get quite hairy. But from what his father had told, that seemed unlikely. Of course, if there were several parallel worlds like his own, then there might also be several earths with demigods or super-wizards, and they might arrive at this one from different sides without ever knowing about each other...

This Kraig person was pretty good. His teachings were a nice blend of realistic lore, probably based on human myths from around the globe, and New Age theories that were obviously guesswork and almost entirely wrong, based on Tormod's personal experience and his mother's descriptions. But somehow he had managed to bake all of this into a surprisingly coherent whole, which was internally consistent. Unless you could actually check the facts, it seemed as plausible as many things in life. Certainly more realistic than quantum physics to the curious and well-read layman. His anecdotes gave the impression that he had firsthand knowledge of the topics he talked about, without actually giving away any verifiable (or falsifiable) data.

But try as he might, Tormod could not picture this guy as a fellow demigod-descendant. For one thing, he seemed to be aging normally. He was supposedly in his early sixties, and looked the part. While energetic enough, he was already ageing. And there was something about his appearance - not his speaking - that bothered Tormod. Something was wrong with this guy. He was in some kind of trouble, but Tormod could not put his finger on it exactly. Perhaps when he got closer.

There had already been a line when they showed up, but then there were lines everywhere, even at the toilets. Why they did not design these places for enough people or restrict the attendance more was a mystery. Well, the obvious reason was that people paid to get in here, and then paid again for buying various stuff. But surely people would have more time for browsing if they spent less time in lines? In any case, Tormod and his host family ended up sitting in the back half of the hall, so it was actually less informative than if they had watched a video recording. However, there were chairs against the wall on the scene. There would be a panel discussion after the lecture, and Mr Kraig was going to be in that panel. That meant he would be within easy reach of Tormod's powers, as long as Tormod could get around to the other side. He just had to wait until the panelists had taken their seats, so he knew which of the chairs to aim for.

Once the panelists took their places, Tormod made his move. Promising to be back soon, he stood up and wended his way out from the middle of the row and out of the room. Taking one last look at the position of the guest speaker, he hurried around the building. There was a corridor behind the hall proper and before the outer wall, but it was not strictly guarded. This was not a place for assassinations and the like, so nobody stopped a harmless-looking teenager in jeans and a T-shirt walking casually along the inner wall. There ... He could see the auras through the wall. And what he saw definitely nailed the coffin, as it were. There was a big black shadow devouring the man's body-aura. A cancer, likely to kill him within months or a year at best. In all other ways, the aura was purely human, not like Tormod's own with intense energy bands in a spectrum barely present in ordinary people. A normal man, dying.

Tormod had seen enough. It did not matter now whether this man considered himself a wolf or a shepherd. His career as either was over. Whether he believed in his own tall tales or not, their telling would soon be finished, and whatever reward a man receives after his death would be all he would keep from them. There was nothing to see here.

Just an old man walking his last mile on a path he had chosen long ago.

Tormod kept traipsing around the convention grounds long after the others had spent their energy. He could not fly in full view of thousands of people, but he could reduce his weight to about 40%, something he had practiced for a long time. It made quite a difference when walking all day. He briefly wondered if others of his race, if they were here, could detect this small but steady use of wizardry. But if they were here, they could probably sense his aura at least as easily as he could sense theirs, so they might see him regardless. No matter where in the world he was, if there really were others like him, chances were they had been around far longer and were far more powerful. There was very little he could do about it, unless he chose to hide from the world. And he did not want to do that. If they were out there, he wanted to meet them and learn from them.

He did not find any "wolves" or "shepherds". He found some traders who did not particularly believe in the goods they were peddling; but they reasoned that someone would sell this stuff anyway, so why not them? Where there is a demand, there will be a supply. It sounded reasonable enough when he listened to their thought processes, at least.

But then there was this young couple selling crystals. There was something off about them. The moment he even came within range, he had a bad feeling. They were not violent, but there was something slimy about their thoughts, something dark and dank like a dungeon. He steeled himself and delved as deeply into the male's mind as he could. He felt the guy looking at him as a "mark", a fool that could be parted from his gold. Following the links of association, he found that the couple were selling "crystals" of colored glass, which they imported for about half a dollar apiece and sold for for \$50, or a hundred times what they could be bought for. And they claimed them to be genuine crystals with magical and healing properties. After all, if people are stupid enough to believe in crazy things like that, they deserve to be milked.

"Hey, this is just colored glass!" Tormod shouted out loud. "Why do you call them healing crystals?" Some people nearby turned and looked. "You are swindlers! Liars! Petty criminals! You are a disgrace to the whole convention!"

"And what do *you* know about crystals, kid?" asked the woman.

"I am a Crystal Child! I can see auras. With a real crystal, I can perform miracles. But this is just dead glass! Worthless junk!"

"Yeah, right. Crystal child. Run off now and play somewhere else."

He turned to the people who were starting to gather around, attracted by his shouting. Besides, there were lots of people milling around anyway. He raised his voice. "Does anyone here have a real crystal, any crystal, even a tiny one? A piece of jewelry would be enough."

He could feel a response only moments later, when a girl in the crowd realized she had a diamond engagement ring. Instantly he pointed to her. "You! Raise your hand for all to see!"

A little nervously, she looked around and then cautiously lifted her hand.

"BEHOLD THE POWER OF A TRUE CRYSTAL!"

Light blossomed forth from her diamond ring, radiating with the brightness of a small light bulb, pulsing in a multitude of colors, enveloping her whole hand in a bright aura. She gasped, and people around her took a step away.

"I am a Crystal Child. Crystals are attuned to me. Crystals obey me. My consciousness reaches out to them as you see on this day, triggering this radiance. I can do more with them. Holding even a small crystal, I can close wounds. With a pure enough crystal, I might even dispel gravity for a brief while. Such is the power I can unleash. But these lumps of chemically colored glass!" He pointed at the traders' display. "These are lifeless, useless, worthless junk. And these people have the temerity to lie baldfaced, claiming that this rubble is magical crystals! You did not expect to meet someone who know both magic and crystals, did you?"

"This is some kind of trick!" said the man.

"Yes, you are playing tricks! Young lady, allow me just once, for a brief moment, to take your hand so that I can partake in the power of the crystal that has been rightfully bequeathed unto you in love."

He held out his hand, and the woman hesitantly put her still shining hand in his. The light grew and brightened.

"POWER OF JUDGMENT! I SUMMON THEE! Let this trickery END!"

He slammed his telekinetic power into the crystal display with all his strength of will. He could normally lift over 15 kilograms these days, double that when he put mental effort into it. It was not quite the strength of a fully grown man, but definitely a grade school kid with a temper tantrum. The display was bowled over, the glass trinkets were sent flying and scattered. One of them, a pretty pink, hit the ground hard enough to break. Then, still holding the girl's hand, Tormod rose half a meter into the air, so that she was left standing with her arm raised. People were pointing and shouting far and wide now.

"I pronounce your judgment! You shall escape with your lives, for we, children of the Crystalline World, have not come to condemn but to heal. But I shall purify this place of your presence. Begone! Begone before a worse fate befalls you!"

He gently lowered himself to the ground and let go of the wide-eyed young woman's hand. Bowing to her, he said: "Believe ever in the power of love." Then he started to walk away, and the crowd parted like the Red Sea parting before Moses in the movies. He had a distinct feeling that the glass peddlers would not try to sell anything again at this particular convention, at least.

"Is there something you have forgotten to tell us?" Marie asked some weeks later.

"Books could be written about all the things we have not told each other" Tormod said, hoping to sound vague. He had his secrets, but who hadn't? It was just that his were about wizardry more often than sex. Hopefully she did not know that, though. "Is there anything in particular you want to know?"

"In fact, yes, there is. For instance, who is this young woman?" She held up her gPad.

He had been looking for semi-demigods, but had forgotten the ubiquitous

smartphone. Someone had taken a picture of him, standing in the air almost half a meter above the ground, striking a dramatic pose. There was indeed a young woman, the one whose hand he was holding while his other hand pointed toward something outside the picture.

"Don't worry, she is happily engaged to someone else."

"She looks kind of confused. But then who would not be."

"I actually only picked her for her diamond engagement ring. Very nice diamond. We Crystal Children like crystals, you may have heard."

"Real crystals, as opposed to fake ones."

"So it would seem."

"I did not know you could levitate."

"In a pinch." Or out of it, but in it too.

"Are you sure you a Crystal Child?"

"So I've been told."

"What if you were something more?"

"What would that be?"

"A rainbow child."

"Like in multi-ethnic?"

"No, like in the next leap in human evolution, after Crystal."

"Never heard of it."

"Some have theorized that just as Indigo Children can have Crystal Children, so Crystal Children can have Rainbow Children, possibly the final step in human spiritual development. Rainbow Children are supposed to be human divinity incarnate. Like the Christ or the Buddha."

"I really have some personality traits that are very different from both of those."

"Well, you are still young. At your age, the coming Buddha was still living as a prince in the palace of his father, unaware of the role he was going to play in the world. We don't even know what the Christ was doing at that age. Perhaps he was learning carpentry, or perhaps he was studying with Buddhist monks in India or the secret scribes of Thoth in Egypt."

"Whereas I am studying English grammar and American history in a very mundane school."

"It is probably only a matter of time before this picture reaches the school yard."

"Well, there are pictures of Superman and the Avengers. There is no particular reason why people would believe this, right?"

"Well, most people won't. I mean, humans don't levitate. Hands don't shine. But still, you will probably hear some questions. So, this is not actually photoshopped?"

"No. I kind of scared a merchant couple selling dirt cheap colored glass as expensive healing crystals."

"So the blog was right about that."

"There is a blog?"

"I'll mail you the link."

Perhaps it was because of all the mind reading he had done during the convention, but Tormod's range of telepathy kept growing in leaps and bounds over the next month. In late March, he could barely reach the back of the classroom without effort. In early May, even his passive range encompassed not only the neighboring classrooms - including above and below - but even the classrooms beyond that, to a distance of approximately 15 m. He couldn't say exactly ... You just don't go around with a measuring tape from classroom to classroom. Not even when you are a Crystal Child.

Of course, he didn't just randomly listen in on other people's thoughts for no good reason. At school, his telepathy was almost completely passive. That is to say, he would notice if someone was thinking of him, much like you would notice someone talking about you or within earshot. Actually, his earshot was approximately the same range, when his improved hearing. But at least during classes, people were more likely to think than to talk. During recess, the opposite sometimes seemed to be the case ...

The reason he knew that the telepathy range was moving into other classrooms was that he had a few friends, or at least clique members, in other classes. Even then, they would not usually spend their time thinking of him. Crystal Child or not, he wasn't that super important. They had their own things to think about, just as he had. Well, not exactly the same things, but each of us has our own life to take care of. It was only when the picture started spreading that he really started noticing.

Students were not supposed to bring mites with them, but slates were part of standard equipment in a progressive school like this. Those who were allergic to electromagnetic radiation would just have to wear protective crystals or other equipment, because there was WiFi everywhere. Once someone got the picture into the school network, it spread in a matter of minutes among the people who knew him.

People were like '*That's Tormod! He's flying? Who is that woman? This must be photoshopped!*' This was the standard reaction, but doubts remained, at least among his New Age friends. After all, he had healed common colds and stomach aches with a single touch. He could read your thoughts and send his own by shaking your hand or just looking into your eyes. (Tormod had kind of neglected to inform them of his growing range over the past few months.) If teaming up with another strong Crystal, it was not unthinkable that he could actually levitate.

"There is no way that's not photoshopped!" said one boy during recess. "Healing people is one thing, if they believe hard enough they will think they are healed. But you can't make a camera believe things."

"Why don't we ask him?"

"Because it is obviously a hoax! He'll think we are stupid."

He already thought they were stupid. In fact, he relied on it.

Rachel was not stupid. '*Can you fly with me or just with her?*' she asked, showing him the picture in her mind. He continued to be amazed that she was able to memorize pictures. He had an amazing long-term memory for words and facts, but his memory was not photographic. He could not for instance look at a page and read it later. Rachel could, although she preferred not to.

'I could fly with you. I could fly far away and high up in the air with you. But it would cause a stir.'

'You already caused a stir.'

'But at the convention, there were only people who already believe in magic. Or at least most of them did. Here at school, very few do. So if they see me flying, they will look for a scientific explanation. And that probably means dissecting me, so they would call in the CIA or some such. I really don't want that to happen. And I certainly don't want you to get mixed up in it!'

'So if we were alone, we could fly.'

'Yes. In Norway I was alone a lot, but California is crowded.'

'One day, I would like to fly with you.'

'You and me both, Rachel.'

Unfortunately, it would not be Rachel that caused a stir the next Monday. Rachel was not the type to bring a weapon to school.

Chapter 23: Love your enemies but kiss your friends

Tormod was already in the classroom, surrounded by his little clique of friends, when he felt the roiling turmoil of Bobby's thoughts from 15 meters away. He concentrated to reach his mind.

'Bobby no! That's crazy!'

"You are the one who drove me crazy!" shouted Bobby at the end of the corridor. "This whole year you've been mocking me! You've driven my friends away from me! I have lost everything because of you!"

'You have not lost everythig yet. If you start shooting with a gun on the school grounds, you WILL lose everything, possibly your life. Or worse, you get life in prison. Prison in America is hell. You know that.'

"I don't care! I'll go to Hell but I'll take you with me! This time you won't get away!"

"Everyone get away from me! Bobby is coming, and he has a handgun!"

"A gun?"

"OMG!"

"What should we do?"

"I'll go out there. If he comes in, Light knows what he will do. None of you are safe with me around."

"But if you go out there, he will shoot you, right?"

"He will certainly try. He hates me, and not without reason."

"Why? This is just crazy!"

"I made a fool of him at the start of the school year. I have dodged all his attempts at revenge, until it got this far. So this is my fault as well. Except I don't shoot people. I had never thought he would go over the edge like that."

"The window! I've seen a picture of you levitating ... If that is true, you could escape that way?"

"I could probably jump down those two floors and take less damage than a round of bullets. But then he might start shooting my friends. He has lost his marbles completely."

"This is like a nightmare! There must be something we can do..."

"No more time." Tormod ran to the door, threw it open, and jumped out in the corridor right in front of Bobby.

Bobby still had his mother's gun hidden inside his jacket. Even in his disturbed state, he would not want to be caught before he got to his target. Now his target was right in front of him. With feverish speed he reached for the gun.

There was no time for precision. Tormod threw a telekinetic punch at the boy's both ankles with all his mental strength, kicking both legs out under him. With one hand inside his jacket and no warning, Bobby fell hard. He tried to break the fall with one hand, but almost broke his arm instead. Tormod jumped on his back, pressing him down.

"Don't do this, Bobby! I know I made a fool of you. You attacked me first and I felt I had the right to defend myself. But you couldn't handle it. I'm sorry it came to this."

"You'll be sorry when I kill you!" Bobby's right hand had closed on the weapon and he was trying to pull it out from under him. Tormod was trying to stop him. Tormod was far stronger than he looked, but his strength was not at the top end of the human range, like his speed. He had to struggle to keep the other boy down, as Bobby fought with the wild fury of a madman with nothing to lose.

"Don't do this to yourself!"

"I'll kill you! I'll effing kill you if it is the last thing I do!"

"I can feel that you are serious. I wish there was some other way. But I can't go that far back in time. I am sorry Bobby. You have no idea how sorry I am. But you have become a danger to everyone."

Holding Bobby down with his weight and the strength of his arms, Tormod reached out with his telekinesis, the power to move things with his mind. He wrenched the gun until it pointed toward the boy's left shoulder. Then he pushed Bobby's finger on the trigger.

Bobby screamed. In movies, when you are hit by a gunshot, you either fall down instantly dead, or you shrug it off as a flesh wound and continue while delivering a speech. In reality, a shot to the shoulder is dangerous, potentially life threatening, but it takes time. First comes the mental shock, the feeling of the bullet slamming into your body, the reaction that this can't be real, this can't be happening to me. Only some seconds later comes the full onslaught of the pain. Doors were opening and students were peeking out of them when Bobby started screaming for real.

"You are not going to kill anyone, Bobby. I truly am sorry, but you can't understand it in the state of mind you're in now."

"You shot me! You effing shot me! It hurts!"

"Getting shot hurts, Bobby. You seemed to have forgotten that. The pain and the fear. I can feel them even now. I can feel other people's pain and fear, just like I can feel their hope and their joy."

Students were screaming too, but in fear rather than pain. Blood was leaking from Bobby's shoulder, staining his clothes and starting to drip onto the floor. A boy was running to fetch a teacher.

"Let go of me! You're killing me!"

"That's a bit ironic, Bobby. You wanted to kill me. You were not afraid to die. Now you have shot yourself, and you are afraid. You should have been afraid in the first place."

"You made me do this! You! Someone help me! Josh! Don't just stand there! Get him off me! I'm shot!"

"Bobby? What the heck happened?"

"I'm shot! I'm dying! Help me!"

"He reached for a concealed gun, I kicked his feet out under him, he fell on his gun and shot himself in the shoulder. Pretty much. He is still crazy. I can't let go of him until he lets go of the gun."

"I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do!"

"It just might be. Bobby, you are bleeding. It is time to repent. Let go of that gun. Let go of that hate. I can help you. You just need to let go."

"Never!"

Students started to crowd in. "Don't get near! He still holds a gun in his right hand! Get back to your classrooms!" They backed away, but not as far as he would have wanted them to.

"I'm dying! Somebody help me!"

"Let go of the gun and I'll help you myself!"

Finally a teacher came running, more in his wake. "What happened here? Is that ... blood?"

"Yes, he holds a handgun in his right hand. The first bullet hit his shoulder. He has five bullets left..."

"You won't take me alive!"

'Fine then.'

A shot rang out. Bobby screamed. Then another, and another. Five shots slamming into his shoulder, completely destroying it. Blood ran freely, pooling on the floor. Finally Bobby lay still.

This better work. I really, really don't want to become a killer in high school. Although I want even less to be dead.

He tried to pour his healing into the now unconscious body, but couldn't. It just didn't work. He might as well try to lift a boulder. *NO! Father, someone, help me!*

He tried again, desperately. Something seemed to give, like a door on rusty hinges. The healing energy flowed into Bobby, racing to his shoulder. It was not enough to repair all the damage, but it slowed to loss of blood. He drew a deep breath and tried again. One more time, healing energy flowed from his hands, seeking out the broken mass that was the boy's shoulder. The open ends of veins and arteries reached out to each other, fused, became hole. The stream of blood stopped completely.

Panting, Tormod got off the back of the prone boy. He tried to stand, but his legs were like rubber. He sat down on the floor, back to the wall, watching the teachers turn the pale blood-stained boy over and removing the gun from his limp hands. The healing had worked, and in the nick of time. Bobby's aura was stable, if pale with the loss of energy. But how would his mostly healed shoulder reconcile with the dangerous blood loss, the torn clothes and the bullets still lodged in his bone? Nothing less than a miracle...

"Everyone!" Tormod shouted. "Friend or foe, I do not care. Join us in prayer for Bobby's life. Whatever your name of the invisible loving power that surrounds us all, let us all reach out and draw down its healing energy." Tormod pulled himself to his feet and shakily raised his arms. The other students awkwardly followed his example, his friends first and then many more. "LIGHT OF LIGHTS! LOVE UNBOUNDED! GREAT WILL OF THE UNIVERSE! We implore you: Spare this boy's life!"

A glow, like from a flashlight packed in cotton, began to shine from Bobby's shoulder. People pointed and shouted. Even the teachers stared in awe. The light gradually faded.

"Behold the true power of forgiveness" said Tormod. "If ye have faith even as a mustard seed..." In reality he could not uproot even a tree with his mind, much less a mountain. But he could do this much. Hopefully it would be enough. Outside, sirens began to howl, drawing rapidly closer.

School was closed, parents contacted, students sent home. In Norway, psychologists would have gathered the kids and talked them through the events, first together and then individually for those who needed it. But in America, people had a lot more faith in parents. That, or not budget for this kind of psychological help. Besides, Americans were more used to shootings. An ordinary teen had seen at least a couple thousand of them on TV, some many more.

Tormod had some explaining to do to his host family. He did not lie outright, but he did leave them with the impression that the boy had shot himself, first when he landed on his gun and later after saying they would never take him alive. And then Tormod had led everyone in prayer and the boy had survived as if by a miracle.

"You did the right thing" said Eileen. "With so many Indigo and even two Crystal Children gathered in one place, bringing someone back from the brink of death is not impossible."

Indeed, Bobby did pull through, and the rest of the classes returned to school the next day. Tormod's class did not get back until the day after. By then the story was all over the local news. Pictures recently taken for their yearbook somehow came into the hands of journalists, and both Bobby's and Tormod's face appeared on the Interwebs. Tormod wondered how many of the casual readers would just look at the headline and the two pictures and mistake who was the attacker and who was the intended victim. Of course, if they mistook it, they still had a point. In a very real sense, Tormod had shot his classmate. Was there nothing else he could have done? Could he have just knocked him out? Did he have some kind of psychic power to scramble the guy's brain or put him to sleep or something? If only his powers came with a handbook! It was a bit late to start practicing when someone was trying to kill you.

Tormod had to face the headmaster and an assembly of teachers and explain his version of the story. But in the end he was not subjected to disciplinary action, even though he admitted that he had tricked Bobby on their first school day after the boy tried to bully him. The school felt that there was not sufficient connection between that episode and the attempted murder. In the end, they saw Tormod as a victim, and he was returned to class for the remaining couple weeks. Exams were coming up, and the school could ill afford more disruption than necessary. He was asked to keep a low profile.

As for Bobby, he did not return to school that year. He stayed in hospital for a couple days, then recuperated at home. His mother supposedly had a visit by the police about the handgun that her son had used. In time he would have to appear in court, although his age would likely still be used in his defense, along with the fact that no one else had been harmed. Whether he would proceed to the criminal system, mental health system, or let loose with a warning, nobody seemed to know for sure. Some said one thing, some another. But what was certain was that he was not coming back to school this school year. A school year that was anyway about to end soon.

'This is our last day together. I wish it was not.' Rachel was miserable, even though it was the last day of school, a cause of celebration for most students. School was widely seen as a prison of sorts, at least by its inmates. The other couples would have time to be together during summer vacation, more so than during the school year. But Tormod would return to Norway by plane on Monday. Now it was Friday.

'Are you free to spend some time with me tomorrow? Perhaps going to the mall or downtown, looking at stuff, getting a bite to eat?'

'A date?'

'A date is for people go get to know each other. Most married couples don't know each other as well as we do. We have thought together about a thousand things. No one except my mother knows me as well as you do...'

'...and my mother does not know me as well as you do. I will miss you always. I would do anything to spend more time with you.'

And that was how it was decided. Tormod firmly told his host family that he needed to spend the Saturday with his best friend and that nobody was going to get pregnant as a result.

So they met at the mall. Eileen insisted of driving him that far, even though there was actually a bus stop less than a quarter of an hour from their home. He managed to get there before Rachel, which was supposedly important on dates. Not that it really was a date. But they pretended to be dating, even going hand in hand most of the time. Of course, for them, holding hands was somewhat like having a cable between their brains, so it was more than mere pretense.

Toward the end, Tormod asked: *'Do you want to fly with me now? We could try to find a spot where people are not looking at us.'*

She did not need to form her agreement into words. The joy and anticipation that welled up in her was answer good enough. At the edge of the parking lot were two empty vans. He led them in between these. *'I will have to fly a bit fast in the beginning to get out of sight. Hold on tight.'* He picked her up in his arms, and she held on to him like they might be pried apart with crowbars. And then, for the first time in way too long, he *flew*.

He was faster than he had been during Christmas break. He could not say how much, certainly not twice as fast, but perhaps 40 kilometer per hour rather than 30. They shot upward, clinging to each other as the ground seemed to fall into the abyss below them.

When he slowed down, the mall was far below them, the people seemingly as small as ants. Even if anyone was looking up - and they might, if they had seen them zoom up - they would not be able to make out any features against the glare of the sky.

'WOW!' She sent her thoughts in her internal mind-language, and he realized that she had not been aware that he could fly this high or this fast, she thought he was just hovering like in the picture. She was not afraid though, just amazed. Everything was more beautiful from above.

'Yes, it is beautiful. This is how the world was meant to be seen, don't you think? Which way is your home from here?'

She projected a map from her mind - another thing she had memorized whole - and he looked down and tried to match the map and the terrain. This must be the road

there, and that block there must be this building. Yes, that matched. This way, then. He started flying in the general direction of her home, keeping the main road in sight beneath them. This was the road by which she had come here, and it would take them most of the way to her home.

It was quiet up here. The din of the traffic below did reach them, but it was muted by the distance, sounding distinctly different from even distant traffic down on Earth. Perhaps it was because the sound was not also being conveyed by the ground, or perhaps it was because of the wide open space up here that diffused the sound but did not distort it like objects down there that deflected or echoed the sound, creating patterns of interference. Here, sound was fainter but also clearer, without distortion. There was a not-quite-silence that did not feel good to break with words, and fortunately they had no need to. They looked at the land below and to all sides, far and wide. They looked at each other, and saw the image of each other in each other's minds. They smiled excitedly but did not quite laugh out loud. They felt each other's arms holding tightly around each other's bodies, although not in the same places.

Even 40 kilometer per hour is not fast when you are this high up. It would feel fast if you zoomed between the rooftops, perhaps dangerously fast, faster than you would usually ride a pedal bike. But it was less than half the speed of the cars on a freeway, and at the height where they cruised, the land moved quite slovenly below them. More than anything they seemed to drift gently as if on an invisible sea with incredibly clear water, the current gently taking them past the various sights that passed below if they bothered to see down. But for the most part they were just drifting together, feeling the warmth of each other's bodies in contrast to the cooling breeze that accompanied their movement, even on a warm day such as this.

'If I distract you while you are flying, will we fall down?'

'It probably depends on how distracted I guess. I recommend not trying.'

'Kissing?'

'Very distracting. I don't know kissing well enough to do it without concentrating completely on it.'

'Then, after we land.'

'We should probably not land in your yard or where anyone recognizes you. I'll look for a good spot some minutes from your home.'

'And then we kiss.'

'If it be your will.'

They drifted like this for more than an hour, and they were not bored.

Finding a place where no one would see them was easier thought than done, but there was a warehouse where he could not see any activity so late on a Saturday. It was perhaps as much as a ten minutes walk from her home, but he wanted that margin of safety. If people saw her descending from the sky with some guy, they might go to great lengths to obtain the information on who he was. Flying men were not that common, even in California.

As they began to approach the ground, he did something he had never done before: He blurred Rachel. He had practiced for quite some time blurring himself, just for occasions like these, where he had to do something impossible. He had not done it on

AstralCon, assuming naively that what happens at the Con stays at the Con. He was not going to make that mistake now. Unlike when ascending, onlookers might see them more and more clearly over time, if they saw them in the first place. So before any features would be clearly visible, he blurred her. She could see the light changing around her. He had practiced making holes in the blur for his eyes, but it was harder to do so for her. He had to see through her eyes telepathically to get it right.

'I am distorting the light waves around you so people won't easily see who you are if they are here at all.'

'Gratitude.'

They landed on the edge of the roof, and then jumped off it, with him still holding her, falling down but gently, landing on the ground. He put her down and they started walking around the main building toward the front gates. There was still no one in sight. The gates were closed and, it turned out, locked. But they were not higher than they could be scaled with a little cooperation. He boosted her, lifting her first and then pushing her by the bottom. She peeked over the top, then stopped.

'What is it? Anyone there?'

'No one. I just don't want you to stop holding my butt. It feels good.'

'This is not the time for butts!'

'Then, when will be the time for butts? When will be the time for kissing? Will you come back for me when you have conquered this mudball? I don't live for centuries. I want to be naked and merge with you, but you say we can't do that. So at least I want you to hold my butt. Or kiss me. Or both.'

'It's not like I don't want to ... merge with you, but I don't trust myself to not make babies.'

'I want your babies. Hopefully they will grow up to be like you.'

'That's what my mother thought, and look what happened. Here I am, skulking around in a closed warehouse, grabbing the buttocks of a girl I will have to leave in a few minutes in a country where I don't belong. Is that really a success story?'

'Getting you to hold on to my butt for this long is a great success. Let's keep it up. Unless you want to kiss.'

'OK. I have seen no sign of life here since we arrived. Let's kiss.'

'Let's! Let's! Let's!'

He eased her down, and they kissed, as awkwardly as any first kiss by perfectly ordinary humans who had only seen kissing on TV. But eventually they managed to press their lips together without their noses getting in the way.

'And now: Butts!' She reached around with one hand to his backside. *'I learned this from The Sims.'*

'Then you know that this tends to lead to babies.'

'I want your babies. Well, at least I don't particularly mind, I guess.'

'My mom would come take them with her, so don't even try.'

'Your mom is a fearsome existence.'

'Like armies under their banners.'

'Kissing seems a little overrated. Are we doing it wrong? Am I supposed to lick your tongue? It seems kind of icky. I like the butt holding better.'

'And butts are not icky?'

'I've washed mine thoroughly.'

'Clearly I needed to know that.'

'Our male dog sniff female dogs' butts quite a bit before they make puppies, so I thought it might be best...'

'WE ARE NOT MAKING PUPPIES!'

That's when they both started laughing like loons, until they both collapsed in a laughing heap. But somehow they managed to get up from there without making any puppies, so all in all it was a good day. They helped each other over the gate - well, mostly he helped her - and then he walked her home.

As he left, she called after him: "Come back when you've conquered this pathetic mudball, OK?" And somehow that sounded like a perfectly natural thing for her to say. No wonder he liked her so much.

Chapter 24: Boy of steel, or at least glass

There were no terrorists this time either. There was a guy sneaking some money out of the country in a double-bottomed briefcase, but he seemed otherwise harmless enough. He had not killed anyone, just dodged some taxes. That was a bit of a national sport in America, from what Tormod gathered, so he left the fellow alone.

After a tearful farewell with his host family, he had spent a whole day and then some getting home: Flying across America, waiting because the plane to Kastrup airport Copenhagen was delayed, then flying across the Atlantic, then from Denmark to Norway, then taking the train up the valley to the station where his mother was waiting for him. He could have taken the bus actually, but she was not that patient. Even though they had talked pretty much every day and he was a big boy now. She loved him very much still, he could feel that, although it was in a very different way from Rachel. He wondered if he would ever see Rachel again. He was not going to conquer this mudball unless things went horribly wrong in pretty much every conceivable way, and he wished she could find a nice guy and make love and have a baby. Even one would probably cure her of that idea forever. But finding a nice guy is not easy for an autistic teen. Or even an adult, he would imagine.

"You are quiet."

"I worry about how Rachel will do now that I am gone. We used to be together every school day."

"She has my sympathy. Living without you is like a dark arctic winter when the sun never rises above the horizon, I only see it briefly shine on the mountaintops when you call me, but I don't get to bathe in its warm rays. But now you are here, and I cannot help being happy, even though I know that you cannot be there while you are here."

"Mom, if all mothers were like you, there would be a lot more demigods in this world. I would feel like one even if I couldn't fly."

"You were my sun even when you were small and weak and clumsy. I would have died for you a thousand times if I could have shielded you from the pain I saw in your eyes, but I did what had to be done so we could stay together."

"I know. No one could love me more than you do, mom. Perhaps no one ever will. This world may need me, but it can never understand me. You are the only one I don't need to hide anything from."

"I guess you found out during Christmas break, but I put your magazines under your new bed."

"That's not exactly what I meant, mom, but thanks anyway."

Tormod passed the boulder at a distance of about ten meters, more than enough clearance even at this speed. He tried to make a U-turn, but that was no longer possible. Back when he was flying no faster than he could run, he would turn around very quickly.

But at this speed, it took a little time to brake, even when carrying nothing more than the clothes he wore. He had learned about this in school, how his kinetic energy increased in proportion to his mass but the square of his speed. They had been told how important this was when driving, but clearly it applied to flying as well.

His mother was waving eagerly at him, and he sped back toward her, making sure to slow down to land gently and precisely in front of her. Would not do do bowl her over!

"55 kilometers per hour! That's way way faster than this winter. You really have sped up."

"Yeah, I thought it was like 40 kilometers per hour on Saturday, but I guess I underestimated the speed because we were so far up."

His mother had picked two reference points that were exactly a kilometer apart on the map, and he had flown past them, starting far enough away to have accelerated to full speed before he came to the first waypoint, and not slowing down until he passed the second. This was a rather more exact way of measuring things than just guessing, but even so, he could not shake the feeling that he had sped up a bit even in these few days. Again, it could be Saturday's practice ... But he had also increased his speed during the months when he did not practice, so who could say.

The small blue house was ideal, lying so far out at the edge of the wilderness that they could start flying almost from the back yard. Not that they literally started from the back yard, and they dressed in unlikely clothes and masks just in case they were to run across any nature lovers. Ironically, at this speed flying could have been genuinely useful for a trip to the local shop for instance, but there was no way he could do that. He needed to keep his powers a secret, or the whole world would suffer for it. American or Russian secret agencies would not hesitate to brainwash, dissect or even clone him to get at his power. That must be avoided at all costs. Saving the world might happen later; now he had to save himself, and that meant being very careful about flying within sight of people, even in disguise.

Even so, being home was a wonderful freedom. He could fly every day, as long as he took care. He could warp through walls if he did not want to go around. He used his "microwave vision" for cooking food again, and it was even stronger than it had been last summer. He would open the fridge from several meters away, fill a glass with milk and make it fly to his hand. He never drank from the box. Somehow his mother had always known when he did that as a kid, even though she supposedly didn't have any superpowers. Mom-powers are a fearsome and mysterious thing!

"I never want to live in a boarding school or with a host family again!" he declared after he warped into the living room. "They were super nice, but always having to hide, never being able to be myself ... No. Just no."

"You won't need to. Well, unless you set people on fire again or do something else stupid."

"I don't need to set them on fire, mom. I am the fastest man alive. Anything less than a shotgun plus surprise is harmless to me now."

"You better not show anyone that you are the fastest man alive."

"It is still not superhero level, well except the flying, and I'm not doing that in plain sight. And don't worry, I won't do competitive sports. Ever."

"That's good. But habits are dangerous little critters, they get you when you are not looking. You should not just walk through walls for convenience, because sooner or later you will do it at school or at a friend's place, and then all hell is loose and we may both need to move to Upper Tonga with only a suitcase."

"But I need to practice!"

"I agree. But you should do so in special practice sessions. Make a habit of putting on your trenchcoat and mask before walking through a wall, just like you do before flying. That way, you will not be triggered to do it just by there being a wall in your way."

"That is a lot of hassle. As long as I ..."

"Not as much hassle as moving to Upper Tonga. Haven't you learned your lesson yet? For every action there is an overreaction. You showed off your tiny powers to your girlfriend and this guy showed up and crashed your little club, so you had to flee the village. You messed a little with the headmaster's head and had to move abroad. You messed a little with that guy's mind at the end of August and he tried to shoot you in May. Light alone knows what karma you still have coming your way that you don't know anything about. You need to be more careful, or we are both in terrible danger. And with you, the world. For the sake of the world, if not for my sake, please be more careful than you have been so far."

Much as he wanted to, Tormod could not hide in the house and fly in the mountains forever. He was going to stay here at least a school year - if he did not set anyone on fire, as his mother said - so he might as well learn about the local community. And they would in turn learn about him, or rather the relatively normal person he pretended to be.

"Since you are not hiding your hair and eyes, people will assume that you dye your hair and use colored contacts. With your colors being brighter than usual, you should pretend that you are inspired by those Japanese cartoons you used to watch in middle school."

"Anime, mom. It is forbidden to call them cartoons. It is considered blasphemy by all true otaku."

"That's it. I knew it was something like sudoku."

"Otaku are the people who obsess about Japanese popular culture. Anime is the animated movies, including TV series. Manga are the drawings, like comic books. And of course there are games. These things are becoming popular all over the world. Perhaps there are otaku even up here."

"Somehow I doubt it, but who knows. If there are not, that just makes it easier for you to pass yourself off as one."

"That should be easy, the nerds at the boarding school were also otaku, so I am only a year behind."

"Good then. So basically you are not exactly normal, you are a shy and introverted boy who obsesses over Japanese things to the point of dying your hair and wearing bright green contacts. You are not completely crazy though. You look young for your age but you are not weak. If people bully you, you don't take dirt from anyone until it goes all to

hell and you need to set them on fire. Offer to fight them in a fair fight, but don't maim them. You know Japanese self-defense after all."

"Judo. It is called Judo."

"Beat them only as much as needed. You are decent at sports, but not the best. You are getting good grades and planning to go to college. Anyway, this is what I've told my coworkers and new friends here about you. They may think I have too high an opinion of you, but hey, I'm a mother. I'm allowed to overestimate my son."

"I'll make a fine otaku, mom. Although I probably shower more than the real ones."

Next, his mother drove him around the area and pointed out the homes of the people she knew personally, mostly from her work, and those she had heard about. He took note, especially if there were young people in the household.

The municipality was situated fairly high in the inland valleys of eastern Norway. Despite the cooler climate, most people here had used to be farmers: The summer was shorter than down by the sea, but sunny; the area received little rain compared to what he was used to. There was some light industry, but the distance from large cities meant that the district was constantly losing young people and the population was shrinking steadily for several decades now.

The small blue house had been a farm once; there was still a graying barn standing nearby, but it had not been in use for almost a generation. The farmer had died without any of the kids living nearby, but they had kept the house well, using it during summer vacations, while a neighbor had added the actual land to his own farm so that only the area around the house was left. The heirs themselves grew older and their children again felt little attachment to the place; besides, Norwegians these days could afford to take their vacation in Spain or Italy or even Thailand. So the house was sold cheap. It was in decent shape, but Tormod still went over and used his X-ray vision to check the construction. His conclusion was that it could stand for another century, but one of the walls could need better insulation. The dimensions of the electrical system were not really up to modern standards, but better insulation and black sun-catcher panels for heating would make it unnecessary to upgrade it.

The municipality was a merger of several distinct villages, but due to the low population there was now only one high school, down in the main valley by the station town. A school bus took the students from the side valley where Tormod now lived. In fact he lived pretty far up even in that village, so it was a quarter's walk to the bus, or a ten minute light jog. His mother had asked if he needed a bike, but he did not see any reason for that. Winter would probably come early up here, and that would mean the end of biking season. They used the car to go shopping, as there were no shops left in this particular village. There had been a small store until recently, but it could not compete now that everyone had cars and shopped down in the valley after work. There was a traffic school down in the station town so he could finally getting started on his driver's license; but from what his mother had heard, nobody cared if he drove without one as long as no one got hurt. There had used to be a "lensmann", a local sheriff, but the police had been centralized and these days law enforcement rarely set foot in the municipality unless something had gone horribly wrong. "And that better not be you" said his mother. To this he fervently agreed. He had had enough of that.

Tormod's mother had 3 weeks of vacation when he came home from America, but then she had to return to work. There were lots of people who wanted summer vacation, especially in July, and she who had started working there just last fall was not in line for the most popular weeks. She had understood that well enough, and now she returned to work. But on the first day she brought her son with her. He was not going to stay there all day, of course, just meet her coworkers before exploring the station town on his own.

Tormod bowed politely to each of them in Japanese fashion, while quietly reading their mind. That was easy, since they were thinking of him anyway. They were not grossed out by his intense red hair or green eyes (which he looked down with quickly anyway). They were prepared for that, and overall found him a nice enough kid. But what everyone thought was *Is he really a high school senior? He looks more like middle school!*

"Mom" said Tormod out loud, "they are looking at me like I'm a kid! Are you sure I will be allowed to start my third year in high school here?"

"As soon as the papers from your second year comes in, it should be no problem. Besides, with the grades you got from your first year, you should been able to skip a year anyway."

After introducing himself at his mother's workplace, Tormod went outside to explore the tiny town. Agriculture was fading, but tourism was doing well enough, both in summer and especially in winter. In addition to the railroad, there was also a major road passing through the valley, connecting the eastern lowlands and the capital with the mid-Norwegian lowlands and Norway's third-largest city, and even a connection westward to the fjords of Western Norway, especially the northern part. The endless stream of cars that drove both ways in summer meant customers to the gas stations and eateries in particular, but also to some degree other shops. And there were always people taking a break wherever there was a parking spot. Indeed, a parking lot meant automatic business in a place like this, although of course the travellers mostly bought small things like snacks and wipes rather than bikes, furniture and electronics.

With all the people milling around down in the station town, it was not easy to say who was a local and who was just passing through. Certainly no one would be able to tell that he was a local, and generally people did not look at him twice. Some did because of his hair, but they did not look a third time. That was how he wanted it. An ordinary kid in an ordinary small station town, windows shopping and looking at life.

Of course, he was not actually an ordinary kid. For instance, he did not only look at life but also at death. He watched a middle-aged man whose aura was almost destroyed by the blackness Tormod recognized as cancer. A closer look at the man's thoughts and memories showed that he was aware of it, although he still held some hope. That hope was probably not going to be fulfilled, and there was nothing Tormod could do about it. He already knew that cancer was above his pray grade, as it were. Weird how flying caused him to fly faster, and reading minds made it easier to read minds at a distance. But healing seemed did not seem to make him a better healer. Or perhaps he just did

not do enough of it. But he had healed friends and host family every time they had a cold or a stomach ache, in addition to the occasional Reiki student. You'd think he would have "leveled up" by now, but there had been no sign of it, and he did not feel any stronger in that regard now.

One day, perhaps, he would be able to cure cancer, avert disasters, and make the world a better place. But for now, he was just a kid in a station town, watching people go about their lives and, occasionally, their deaths.

"This is ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous."

"I don't disagree with you" said Tormod, landing in front of his mother. "If I were to fly any faster, I am not sure I could breathe."

"According to my stopwatch, you're going 80 kilometers an hour. That's the speed limit on most Norwegian roads outside the towns."

"And it feels every bit like it when I am close to the ground. Further up I mostly feel the wind pressure."

"If we make you a good cape you can pass for a superhero."

"Striking fear into the hearts of evildoers!"

"Too bad you are not actually all that super."

"Well, I have my microwave power."

"Which is super for making dinner. I mean, I would personally feel a lot better if you were invulnerable."

"Well, nobody has tried shooting me in a while, so we don't know for sure that I'm not."

"This is not a joking matter, actually."

"Sorry. But seriously, I have no idea how to test invulnerability if we don't try to harm me in some way."

"Letting people shoot at you is a terrible way to test it. Look what happened to Baldr."

"You mean the son of Odin?"

"Yeah."

"Wait, am I related to him?"

"I was talking about how he was supposed to be invulnerable and they let people shoot at him just to prove it. Turned out he was vulnerable to mistletoe."

"Who isn't, at least during Christmas."

"Or Achilles with his heel. History shows that letting people just shoot at you is a terrible idea."

"Well, those are myths, not history."

"As far as most people know. But we know that history and myth are not so easily separated."

"So, how about stabbing my finger with a knife?"

"How about a needle?"

"Perhaps it won't work if I do it to myself. You try stabbing my finger with a needle and I try to not be stabbed."

"I kind of hate doing that, but ... Sooner or later we should probably try."

They went home, and his mother disinfected a needle in boiling water. Just in case.

"OK, round 1: Needle versus invulnerability! GO!"

She jabbed at his finger with the needle. It did not even hit.

"We probably need to enlist someone who does not love me more than herself."

"No, seriously. I try." She jabbed at him repeatedly. "I can't even get to you. It is like there is a layer of glass around your finger." She jabbed at another finger. "Fingers."

"I have become invulnerable to needles! LEVEL UP!"

"It does look like it. I hope you won't need any vaccines."

"It probably only works when I want to be invulnerable."

"That is a bit worrying. What if someone ambushes you?"

"With a needle?"

"I mean, in the future."

"I can fly for over an hour without getting tired, so I can probably also maintain this layer of imaginary glass for a while."

"It is not obvious that it works the same way. And most of your threats won't be needles."

"Hopefully there won't be any threats."

"At some point there will be."

"Try a knife then."

"What if I hurt you?"

"Then I heal myself. I healed that shot wound which was bleeding like crazy and the bones were shattered and the sinews were cut. Wounds is one of the few things I can actually fix reasonably well. As long as you don't actually amputate anything, I should be fine."

"OK." She went and fetched a bread knife, which she gingerly tried to cut the back of his hand with. The effect was the same as with the needle: It did not even connect with his skin.

"It seems that I am not exactly invulnerable, rather there is some kind of invisible armor around me when I anticipate an attack. Interesting."

"I'll try a hammer and nail. You are sure you can heal that?"

"I've fixed worse, I just told you that."

So perhaps she did not hit the nail with all her strength, but he was definitely more armored than your average wooden plank.

"OK, it seems you can repel small attacks, so that's good. If someone tries to hit you with their fists or a knife, and you know it is coming, you should be fine. I still think it is best to not make enemies in the first place, until you are far more 'super' than you are today. Or even then, but I guess at some point you will have to stop evil people from doing evil things. But not this year. You may fly like a superman, but your other powers are pretty modest."

"I know. Like party tricks."

"Perhaps not quite that bad anymore, but yeah, you have a bunch of unimpressive abilities as of yet. And flying alone won't save the day, more's the pity."

Chapter 25: Girl next door

It was also in July that Tormod met the girl next door. You may say they took their sweet time, but then next door was half a kilometer away, so it was not like they would bump into each other exactly. There had been four farms along the hillside here. The one with the blue house was the first to go, then the one to the west. Farm number three had taken over the fields of the other two, and more lately the one to the west of there again. So now there was only one on this particular slope. The fields closest to the surviving farm were used for potatoes and vegetables, but the rest were used to grow grass for animals.

It was on the tractor he saw her, as she was harvesting grass on the field nearest to the blue house. The slope was quite gentle so there wasn't really any risk the tractor would keel over, but it looked a bit uncomfortable even so. There was a yellow harvester of some sort mounted on the side of the tractor, and it cut the grass and blew it into some sort of machine that packed it into huge balls and packed them in plastic somehow, automatically. All she had to do was stay on track, and she had done that masterfully. She had already harvested most of the field while Tormod had been up in the mountains. As he crossed the yard to the house, she stopped the tractor and jumped off.

She looked no more than 16 years old. She had brownish hair and a natural tan from having been out in the sun a lot. She waved at him and came running toward him.

"Hola neighbor! I thought we weren't going to meet until school began! Where have you been hiding?"

"Uh, I spend a lot of time out in nature."

"Haha! As if! With that skin, you would have been sunburned to the bone if you were outside as much as I am. Don't be ashamed, I know you're sitting inside watching manga. Wish it were me, but there is crazy much work to do on a farm. When the rest of you are all lazy for two months, I work my ass off. Well, there's some left ..." She slapped her backside "... but you know what I mean."

She was in fact fairly athletic, so while she did have more hips than any normal boy, there wasn't more fat than there needed to be to not look weird. The only reason she looked reasonably feminine was her slim waist and the T-shirt that did a terrible job at keeping secrets about her chest measurements.

"Yes, I have breasts" she said, noticing his quick body scan. "And you have not. Clearly we were meant for each other." She broke into a big grin. "Or perhaps not. Jump on board and let's get to know each other better."

'Hi mom, I'm going with the neighbor girl for a little while, is it OK?' He knew he could reach his mother at a distance of over 50 meters now if he concentrated, and casually at half that.

'Sure, just don't make any babies.'

'No babies, puppies, calves or lambs, I promise!'

He jumped onto the tractor behind the driver's seat, perching uneasily on mechanical parts he had only the vaguest idea what might be doing. Luckily his X-ray range had grown to about 60 cm now, so he could more or less see how nearby things were connected and make sure he did not risk any damage to himself or the tractor by where he stepped.

"My name is Silje. Try to say 'Lille Siljes ville lilje' fast five times."

"Lille Siljes ville lilje. Lille Siljes ville lilje. Lille Siljes ville lilje. Lille Siljes ville lilje. Lille Siljes ville lilje."

"Wow, you are a master of the tongue twister! I shall have to find harder challenges for you. You are Tormod, right? You are crazy about all things Japanese and you spent last year in America. Why not in Japan?"

"It is easier to get exchanged to America. Much more so. And I spoke English already. And it was a place where people were pretty tolerant of weirdos."

"I should go there then. I've got chestnut hair and hazel eyes and I'm nutty all over."

"Perhaps not the same kind of nutty as the Californians."

"Probably not. How were they?"

"I learned Reiki. It is a kind of healing with the hands."

"Like massage therapy?"

"Not really, more like healing energy radiating from the hands. It seems to work sometimes."

"My mom is always complaining about hemorrhoids, I'll recommend you to her."

"I am sure that will be super popular with the whole family. So what is your weirdness? Do you secretly solve math problems at night when you should be sleeping?"

"I can't cook water without burning it, but I can slaughter animals like there's no tomorrow. I am handy with a rifle and I drive this beast here better than my dad. One day I'm going to take over this farm. Can you cook?"

"I can cook and bake without a stove" he assured her.

"Great, you're hired as my husband. You get all the potatoes you can eat. And sex, but that will have to wait, summer is too busy for that."

"I have a genetic condition that makes me very wary of who I make babies with."

"And just when this was getting good. Wait, you did not say you can't have babies."

"Not for a while."

"That's OK, it's ten years till I need to have babies. So, about you. Do you do anything other than watch manga, heal people and what was the third thing?"

"Manga is comics. You read manga, watch anime and play games."

"Right, I had forgotten that people who aren't farmers have time to play games. Actually I sometimes get to play games during winter. Farmville, you know that?"

"You really are a farm girl."

"That's for sure! I am the fertile soil given female form, the embodiment of fertility, enduring strength and something else that I have forgotten now. It was a poem, but I am not good with poems. I am good with animals. They don't know what hits them. One moment I am cuddling them, the next, BLAM! They are dead, blood spurting from their slashed throat. Their feet kick a couple times and then they are still, and I cut them open and remove the steaming entrails with my bare hands, dripping with blood."

"You can tone it down now, I respect you already."

"But will you still respect me in the morning?"

"If I live that long."

"Good point. Well, as long as you don't eat anything I cook, you should be fine. On that note, come home with me. My mom will do the cooking, promise, cross my heart and hope to kill... How did that go again?"

"Sure, I'll come home with you. Since you have breasts, I cannot say no to anything you say."

"So I've been told. I haven't really had much chance to test it yet."

"Been busy with the farm, eh?"

"Just precisely."

Silje's parents were not as much fun as she was, but they were OK people. When Tormod showed up at their doorstep together with her, they did not seem upset or even particularly surprised. After calling his mother, he stayed there for an afternoon meal, and then a tour of the fields and the barn. Silje was clearly proud of the farm, and of her own role in it.

"I can do pretty much anything my dad can do by now." She went over to a bunch of feedgrain sacks. "I can carry these 50 kilos sacks now." She lifted one of them, not easily but not with terrible effort either. "My dad tells me not to, says that it may damage my back before I am fully grown. But as you can see, I can handle it."

"To be honest, I agree with your dad." Tormod went over and picked the sack out of her arms, lifting it easily over his head. "I won't say this is a man's job, but I think you should wait until you are 18 and your skeleton is fully grown."

"Whoa, you are a lot stronger than you look! But you're no older than me, right?"

"Wrong. I am 18. I am about to start my final year of high school in a few weeks."

"Seriously? You look like you are 15, but I heard you were in high school. I figured we'd end up in the same class."

"Tempting as that may be, I think three years of high school will have to be enough. Where did you want this sack?"

"Just put it down there. Dude, I can't believe you're stronger than me! My self-confidence is shaken. Shaken."

"What? I'm a guy, I'm 18. I just happen to look childish. I'm as strong as any skinny boy my age."

"So it seems. I did not think watching manga was that good an exercise."

"Most otaku only exercise one hand, but some of us need both" he said blandly.

She blinked. "What does that ... OMG!" She laughed out loud. "You are as crazy as I am. Can you move in tonight? We have an extra bed."

"Does it squeak?"

"Do you want to find out?"

"I know you're just messing with me, but thanks anyway."

"You're welcome. But seriously, if you get bored watching manga, we could need

another pair of hands here during the summer. My dad may even be willing to pay you. I'll tell him that otherwise I shall have to pay you with my body."

"Are you sure you have something I want and I don't have anything you want?"

"Nope. But he doesn't need to know that."

"You are smart for a nutty girl."

"I prefer 'clever'. Or perhaps 'devious'."

"Well, I should get home before my mom thinks I'm making babies. She worries about that a lot."

"With good reason, I am sure. See you soon!"

For the rest of the summer holiday, Tormod was a fairly regular guest at the Aasen farm, where he helped with the farm work. At first he had no clue what to do until someone showed him, but he was a quick learner. And he impressed the farmer with his speed and strength.

"You're a lot stronger than you look" the man said grudgingly.

"That must be because I look much weaker than I am."

"Yeah, that must be it. You really look like an office rat, just like my son."

It turned out that Silje had an older brother. Five years older, in fact. He had gone to the city to get an education, and now he only called back now and then. He had studied psychology and now he was living with some girlfriend in the city, complaining every time he called about how expensive the rent was there.

"Thank the Devil the rent is high when everyone wants to live in the same tiny spot" said the father. "The whole country is almost empty and people are bidding over each other to live near the King. Perhaps they think they will become kings too if they just live close enough."

Silje never paid him with her body, of course, but her father did send with him sacks full of potatoes with alarming regularity after he realized the boy could carry them easily. "He's trying to bribe you with potatoes" said Silje. "I think he likes you."

Tormod thought so too. The work was fun, he got to work out some of his more physical skills, and the whole family was friendly in a bizarre way. Well, actually the mother was fairly normal, although she would do nothing to stop the other two.

"Don't you work faster than me you little scoundrel!" said the farmer on warm August day. "You're making an old man look bad. Where's your respect?"

"It's sleeping in today" Tormod said blandly, then amended: "I was just trying to impress you."

"Impress the little lady, I bet. Say, how would you like marrying her and taking over the farm? We could need a speedy little rat like you. And the girl got good jugs. I'm sure her ass will grow out with time. Her mom was also a bit like that, and look at her now, I can barely reach around her hips with both arms!"

"They will both be so happy to hear that, I bet."

"Birthing hips, we call them. We should have had more kids. If we had known that weasel would run out on us and the farm, we should have made a van full of boys. Look, if you want the farm, you have to take our family name, OK? We can't have some

stranger name running the farm."

"I hope you are joking. I am just helping out here."

"Of course, of course. It is the ass, isn't it? I'll talk with her mom and have her make more of the girl's favorite foods. She is just too skinny. She'll flesh out any day. Just you wait and see."

"Just don't let Silje near the kitchen. The potatoes run away screaming when they see her coming."

"She'll become a good wife in time. She just need more practice."

"Last time she was in there, she cut her finger. She can operate dangerous farm machines without losing a single hair, but let her into the kitchen and she comes out dripping blood. Luckily I know a hex to still blood."

"You're one of those folks that descend from the Devil, aren't you? You kinda look the part."

"My grandma certainly thinks so, but my mom does not."

"Well, I don't mind you going to hell as long as you do a good job on Earth first."

"Your concern is touching. I'll bear that in mind."

"I'll ready a sack of cabbage for you tonight. They spoil faster than the potatoes, so tell you mom to use them soon."

"If you make it cauliflower, I'll consider coming back."

Tormod could read their thoughts, so he knew when the man was joking, but he also knew when he was serious. The farmer had always thought his son would inherit the farm, and felt deeply betrayed, even though he still loved the boy. And he sincerely wished he had more boys. He had his doubts about a woman being able to run the farm, let alone do that and raise children. If the prodigal son did not return, Silje would inherit the farm by default, and her husband would be his new son. That was how he saw the world. That was how he was raised. God and country, wife and children, but before all the farm.

And then it was first schoolday again. The first day of the rest of your life, as they say. In this case, the first day of the last year of compulsory school in Norway, for Tormod. But also the first day in a new class where he did not know a soul. He was getting used to that now. And it certainly was a progress from the old habit of first day in a class where you already hated and feared everyone. Perhaps he could do better this time.

He was early, and still waiting outside the classroom when the trouble began. Because even when people are 18 or 19, some don't act their age, evidently. And some don't look theirs.

"Hey kid, you've gone wrong. This is third year. In high school."

"Actually, that's where I was..."

"Bjarne, be careful! This is Silje's boyfriend!"

"Seriously? This kid can carry two 50 kilos sacks at once?"

"I sure can! If only we had some sacks to demonstrate ... Hey, any of you girls at least 50 kilos?"

The girls looked at each other and several of them began giggling. They were easily

over 50 kg, pretty much all of them. Then two of them stepped forward. They seemed vaguely familiar?

"Hey, I remember you! You came to visit Silje just when I was leaving! You were like 'Hi!' and I was like 'Bye!' Sorry about that."

"No problem. So what you want us to do?"

"Play 50 kilos sacks for a few seconds. Just stand there."

While the rest of the class stood staring, he picked up first one girl over his right shoulder and then the other over his left. The second was the difficult part, but his telekinesis had grown to the point where he could lift 50 kilo and more with his mind alone, and write a legible handwriting if need be. He just couldn't do two complicated things at once. So he used his telekinesis as a third hand to help gather up the second girl. In a few breaths, both of the teen girls were hanging over his shoulders with their butt in the air. Oh. That might be a bit sexier than he had originally aimed for. He just wanted to warn people away from picking on him. Now he was sandwiched between two round bottoms, one on each arm.

"Uh, I should probably not make a habit of this. I just wanted to show that yes, I am stronger than I look, OK?" He crouched and set the girls down. They were red-faced but then they looked at each other and giggled, so they would probably not report him to the authorities for sexual harassment.

"Hey, I could have done that too!" said the boy called Bjarne.

"But we won't let you" said one of the girls.

"Nobody doubts that you are strong" said Tormod. "Anyone can see that at a glance. It is only I who have to prove things, because I don't look the part. Plus I am a stranger here."

This seemed to calm the other boy. A quick peek at his thoughts showed that he was flattered to be seen as strong.

"I hear you were in America all last year?" said another boy.

"Yeah, last school year I was in a town in California. It was fun but people were seriously weird. Some believed in all kinds of magic and didn't vaccinate their children, others had revolvers lying around in the house. One of my classmates shot himself with his mother's handgun."

"Whoa! You've really seen the world!"

"No, just a tiny piece of it. But a weird piece, yeah."

"So what do you think about this place?"

"Lots of old folks here. It is kind of depressing with so many people graying and dying. But the girls are cute, the ones there are."

"Is it true that you and Silje are, you know, together?"

"We have been working together a lot this last month, but we haven't been sleeping together."

"Sleeping is overrated! But you've been playing in the hay, right?"

Tormod thought back. The Aasen farm had a large hayloft. Even though most of the grass these days was automatically packed into huge white plastic balls, they would also cut some of the fields and dry them in the air to make hay. It took much more manual work, but hay was good for the digestion for the animals and people paid a premium for

it. The sunny summers up here made haying a lucrative business if you had enough hands, which was where he came in. The hayloft was almost full now at the end of summer, but had been pretty low when he first saw it. In between, there was a time when you could make pretty long jumps and not get hurt, because the loose hay absorbed the fall.

"Jumping in the hay is pretty fun" he admitted. For most farm kids, it was probably the closest they ever came to flying. "It feels kind of like you're flying, right?"

There was a lot of tittering and giggling and even outright laughing. Clearly the kids around here all had fond memories of the haylofts, even though perhaps most weren't farm kids themselves. But then the teacher showed up, so the conversation ended there.

Chapter 26: The hay hits the fan

School was super easy, at least the first week. Admittedly high school in America had also been super easy, but this was definitely easier than Tormod remembered from his first year. Perhaps public schools just were a lot more relaxed than boarding schools - the Commercial High School had a reputation to uphold for educating top students, after all. So it need not be Tormod who had grown smarter again - although he could not be sure. Online IQ tests grew increasingly unreliable when you got over 150, and he was above that now.

His mother had often pointed out that intelligence and wisdom were separate stats for a reason, and he got a demonstration of that on Saturday when he returned to the Aasen farm. He was not really expected to work there during the school week, although Silje did. But on Saturday he did. Silje looked at him weirdly, and not in a good way. "You come with me" she said and dragged him behind the barn. She seemed kind of upset.

"I hear you've been telling everyone on the first day of school that we've done it. That's a bit early, don't you think? And even if it had been true, you shouldn't just blabber about it to the whole class."

"Done what?"

"The sex!"

"Seriously? Some kid asked me before the first class even started, and I said out loud that we had NOT slept together. So that's a bit of a mystery."

"So why does everyone ask me if it is true?"

"Perhaps they really, really want it to be true? Since that guy was asking me like five minutes after we met, there must already have been a rumor by then. I guess you are just so sexy they can't believe a guy being around you thinking about anything else."

"I think we have two rumors here, rumor 1 before he asked you and rumor 2 after."

"Why don't you ask the two friends of you who are in my class? They were with a bunch of other girls who came here one night just as I left."

"The two you were doing weightlifting on?"

"That would be the ones!"

"They were very happy about that, it seems. Problem is, they told me the opposite of what you do."

"Really? Could you call them or something and ask them if they heard me say that I slept with you or that I did not sleep with you?"

"You wait here."

She came back a few minutes later. "They said you denied the sleeping but not the sex."

"Wait. Let me spool back and replay that sequence in my head. Something about hay. Quick question: Is jumping in the hay usually associated with sex among young adults in this area?"

"Of course!"

"Oh."

"What did YOU think it meant?"

"Jumping into the hayloft from under the ceiling, like you showed me."

"Oh gracious mother of pearl. You really are a city kid, aren't you?"

"No, not really. I grew up in a village, but there was too much rain for hay. Besides I did not get to play on any of the farms, and it was mostly an industry village anyway."

"OK. Look, hitting the hay with someone means the same as sleeping with them, except you don't necessarily sleep. It means going to bed with them basically."

"Duly noted. I'll tell everyone on Monday that I am a total virgin!"

She looked at him like he was a total idiot instead. "I'll handle this, you'll just make it worse again. Have you ever been human?"

"Hey, my mom is human! The best!"

"Then ask her what happens if a guy suddenly starts going around denying that he has done it with a particular girl."

"OK."

"I can tell you what it means. It means that she is *pregnant*. Or at least he thinks she is pregnant. And he's trying to get off the hook."

"Why would you be pregnant? Is there some other guy? Not that I particularly mind, but I can see how..."

"That's what I mean! No, I am not pregnant, because I am, in your excellent phrase, A TOTAL VIRGIN."

"Ah, that makes two of us then."

"Well, I did not really expect you to get pregnant. But the point is, boys boast about having sex with girls they don't have sex with, and it is a real bother, but it is not a fifth of the bother that comes when they start going around denying it out of the blue. So don't do that. Just shut your big mouth, and think before you speak next time. If you are in doubt what someone means, ask them. Or read their mind or whatever you sexy hellspawn do. I could swear you've been reading my mind sometimes. And other times you're as clueless as a hat rack. It drives me nuts."

"I'm not actually a hellspawn by the way. It's just something my crazy grandma used to say."

"Sometimes I have to wonder. You look like you're 15, and you're stronger than a grown man and faster than a snake. Girls who have only seen you once before, throw themselves at you."

He did not remember the last part happening, but this was probably not the time to discuss it.

"I am sorry I made you upset" he said generally.

"It's not like I'm upset about it... It's just ... Well, OK. I'm upset, but I don't have a right to be. You're just clueless. Just because you are smart does not mean you know everything, and you're a stranger in this part of the country. Let's get back to work before my dad thinks we're making babies. I don't want him to be quite that happy."

"Carrots this time. We could feed the whole village with the stuff they send with you home!"

"He's trying to bribe you into letting me marry his daughter, I think. So we can live happily ever after, running the farm and having lots of babies."

"I don't think that would be such a great idea. I mean, it would be nice to have you living nearby, but ... A village is a close-knit community. You could not really *hide* in Smallville. You need to go to Metropolis for that. The city is where you can disappear in the crowd. Where no one will notice you among the hundreds of thousands of other people. Of course, with your hair and eyes you are all too easy to recognize, but you are already able to blur those."

"If I can hide them when using powers then yeah, looking like this in normal life will probably make me harder to recognize. But for now, I don't really have any superpowers except flying. And moving through walls. Not really crimefighting stuff."

"I am not even sure crimefighting is what you were born to do. I think only you will know your destiny for sure. Either you will find it, or it will find you."

"I suppose I could hide out up here while my powers grow and mature. But making babies would probably be a terrible idea. So no, I am not really thinking about marrying anytime soon. I don't even understand my own powers. How would I be able to deal with kids who might have the same powers or even different powers? No. Just no."

"Just Say No."

"I just said no!"

"The hard part is saying no to the girl. Or so I've been told."

"You are in love with Tormod, aren't you?"

Tormod had been lost in thought, but when he heard a girl's voice say that, he woke up fast. It took him a few moments to realize that the voice did not come from right beside him, even though he had heard it so clearly, but from some whole other part of the school, 20 meters or perhaps even 30 meters away. He had no idea how far his "super-hearing" reached these days, but clearly it had grown again since he was in America.

"I don't know! I've never felt like this before." That was a quite familiar voice, well, not literally family but neighbor at least.

"Oh?" said the first girl. "You've never been in love?"

"Not really. I always knew I wanted to marry a guy, but I did not really care who."

"Lucky you."

"I mean, as long as he was a nice guy and willing to stay on the farm with me and help out a bit. And he ought to be good with kids because I was going to have an heir and a spare, and someone needed to take care of them besides me, I had to take care of the farm after all."

"You know, I think you've been in love with the farm all this time."

"If I had a vague image of what my future husband would look like, it was a rugged, broad-shouldered man with a tanned face, a typical farmer. The opposite of Tormod."

"Yeah, about that, you say he's been working on the farm with you this summer, so why isn't he sunburned? Does he just use a lot of sun factor?"

"I don't know. I don't really know anything about him, even though he goes in and out our doors all the time. How can he look younger than me but be two years older? How can he be so thin and yet so strong? How can he sometimes understand things no one has said, and other times not understand things you say?"

"He is not really *that* thin. Slender, yeah. Wiry. But it's not like he is scrawny or fragile."

"Sometimes I could swear he is reading my thoughts, but he never tells me his own. He is a mystery to me. It's like, have you seen those sunglasses that look like mirrors from outside? You know that he can see you as you are, but you only see a reflection of yourself."

"Yeah, that's kind of creepy. Like people try to hide something from you. Especially guys, you just know they are staring at your boobs but you can't prove it."

"Sometimes it is like he is literally looking through me, and I feel completely naked. Not just my body, but inside. Like he can see what I think, what I feel, who I really am. But it does not seem to bother him. I think that is why I ... Why I love him. Or whatever it is I do. Not because he is strong and fast and a good worker, not because he looks kind of cool. But because he looks at me like, I know you are totally nuts, and I am fine with that."

"Well, why not? You may be nuts, but you are nuts in a good way."

"Yeah, but I am nuttier than you think."

"Aren't we all."

"No, I mean, when my mom treats me like a kid and I think 'I wish you fall down the stairs and break a lot of bones' and he looks at me like 'I see you're a teenager, let's just ignore it and it's going to blow over'. Or I suddenly feel the urge to take off my top and flash my boobs to see him react and he looks at me like 'I see you're horny, let's just ignore it and it will blow over.'"

"Did you actually take off your top?"

"Are you crazy?"

"Well, you're the one who is supposed to be crazy. You are in love after all."

"I'm not *that* crazy. I just *feel* that crazy. I don't *do* crazy."

"Well, it would have been interesting."

"Maybe I'll do that one day. But I'm afraid."

"Well, yeah. If you've never done it with a guy before you would be nervous. Beer helps. The more beer, the less tops."

"I'm not sure I want it to happen that way."

"Are you sure you want it to happen at all?"

"No. I mean, I'm not sure of anything. I am afraid of losing what we have now. But I am also afraid of never getting what we don't have."

"Well, most likely he won't settle down on a farm anyway, so you will be better off waiting for Mr Tanned Face."

"Yeah. I know that. I just don't *feel* it."

"Oh man, we have to hurry back to class. Later, alligator!"

Tormod had been small and weak most of his life, and he had continued to see himself that way even for the first year after this was not strictly true anymore. By now, he certainly did not see himself that way anymore, but he had still assumed that others saw him that way. And yet over the first month in his new school, he gradually learned that this was no longer how he was seen. Whenever he looked at himself through the eyes of other, he saw something else: A young, wiry athlete. A runner rather than a weightlifter, certainly, but not the weak and skinny kid he had used to be. His mother had been right: By standing up to the first hint about him being weak, he had nipped the idea in its bud.

As if to remove all doubt, the soccer club started pestering him to join. "We need a runner like you in the offense!" they told him.

"A runner like me? There are at least three boys just in my class who run faster than me." He had made sure of that. He could not realistically fake being a slowpoke, but he made sure never to be one of the top tree in anything physical.

"Yeah, they do" said the captain of the football team. "But you know the difference? They are winded, you are not."

He was not able to fake that, and someone had noticed. He had not thought these valley kids would see through him that easily!

"You may not be able to run as fast as the best yet, but that will improve with practice. And meanwhile, your stamina is really going to make a difference in a long match. In fact, we have a plan for using it to wear them out. You draw them back and forth across the field until they are panting like walruses, then we make our offensive and smash them."

"I'm not really into sports. I prefer getting my exercise the natural way. I didn't play soccer in school before, I barely even know the rules!"

"You're one of the smartest kids in the whole school, learning the rules takes five minutes. You don't need to know anything about strategy and tactics. All you need to do is run all over the place wearing them out, and we'll do the rest."

"Doesn't sound like a very exciting way to spend my free time. Besides, isn't it unfair? Putting someone who can't get tired against those who tire easily?"

"The point of soccer is not fairness but winning. As long as you don't break the rules, anything goes. Saying that a good runner should not play soccer is like saying only short people should play basketball. Sports means having the best people doing what they do best, that is what makes it awesome to watch for all the people on the tribune."

"I really don't like that kind of attention. I prefer it when people don't even notice that I'm there." Because when they thought of him, he could hear it or at least feel it from thirty meters away. There were already people thinking about him way too often, as far as he was concerned.

It did not help that many of those who thought about him were girls. And while girls were usually not thinking about sex as often and as explicitly as boys, the difference seemed to be narrowing as they grew older. By 18-19 as most of them were now, the girls generally had quite a bit more sexual and romantic experience than the boys, since

it was still the rule that the girls were younger than the boys in a relationship. It was certainly not a hard and fast rule. Nobody would look at you strange if a girl hooked up with a boy a year younger than her, but it was even more normal for the boy to be several years older. It was mainly the lack of college-age boys here, so far from the nearest college, that forced girls to stick to boys their own age. And even then, there was pretty fierce competition for the young grown-up men who for some reason had not gone on to college, or - even more rarely - had returned. And they on their side were looking for the teen girls, because older girls were even more rare than the boys. All over Norway, more girls than boys went to college, almost two girls for every boy, and even fewer of them returned to the rural villages.

Looking like 16 years old at most, Tormod did pass under the radar of many of the girls in his own year, although not all. One of the girls he had carried over his shoulder on the first day was still not letting go of it even after several weeks, but would replay it in her head, even embellishing it to herself, sometimes when bored in class. While this was a thing boys tended to enjoy more (as long as they were the ones carrying, rather than being carried), some girls also found it exciting, and it so happened that this was one of them. A little on the chubby side, although not unhealthy looking at all, she did not have a truckload of confidence with boys, and did not currently have a boyfriend. (Her friend who had also volunteered did have an older boyfriend, and her fantasies about him were less distracting.)

In addition there were the first year girls. In Silje's class in particular, because she did not have the common sense to try to make the other girls less interested in him. She hyped him on every opportunity with her close friends, who then went on to spread word of his greatness to their other friends. As far as the first-years knew, he was stronger than an adult farmer, smarter than a teacher, tireless, unsurpassed as an entertainer, good with animals, kind and understanding yet bold and self-assured. With the boys fretting about who he was going to displace from the soccer team, the first-year girls were getting increasingly starry-eyed. Luckily at least most of them were not yet thinking in very concrete sexual terms, but more vaguely romantic and dreamy. Although there were a few thinking further ahead. That could be somewhat distracting, or in extreme cases outright embarrassing. He usually managed to close his mind to people thinking about him when he was busy, but some thoughts were harder to ignore than others.

"You've played ball games in P.E before, so it should probably not be a big deal" reasoned Tormod's mother. "As long as you don't start liking it or anything, you can probably pace yourself."

"I'd rather go flying."

"Well, just don't do that on the soccer field."

"I'll do my best not to."

"And no setting enemy players on fire."

"Mom, it is not really a habit!"

And so Tormod showed up for his first soccer practice. He was not entirely unfamiliar

with the game: He had taken part in various ball games during P.E over the years, including soccer. But this was different. For one thing, all the other players were there of their own free will. They liked it, they were serious about it, they had ambitions in that direction. They were jocks rather than nerds, or as he now preferred to think of it, body-oriented as opposed to mind-oriented. This did not necessarily mean they were stupid (although some of them were below average), but the day only has so many hours. You can't read a book while practicing sports, or the other way around. Well, there are audiobooks, but not on the soccer field.

So the boys that were gathered on the field were generally not very bookish and generally did not have high ambitions in the intellectual arena, or at least not realistic ambitions. The people who planned to become doctors or CEOs or investment bankers were not here, and neither were the ones who wanted to become scientists or programmers or engineers. In short, Tormod had a feeling that he was surrounded by the future unemployed, because Norway toward the mid-21st century was not likely to need many factory workers or truck drivers. Robots would take those jobs, and these people would probably never be able to live off their sports career. They were the future losers of society, and there was nothing he could do for them.

That was leaving out the rather obvious fact that these boys were the same type of boys that had bullied him for most of his life. These particular boys right here had not done that. In fact, they respected him. He was fast and reasonably strong despite his youthful looks, he was confident and the girls liked him, but he was not flaunting any of it. He was a likable person and one they wanted to be friends with. But if he had continued to be small and weak and clumsy like he was until a couple years ago, they would have treated him with scorn at best, if not actually physically pushed him around. They were even now quite dismissive of others who did not measure up to their ideas of strength and courage, like the fat boys that every school had, more now than ever before. These would not have been welcome here even if they wanted to, and were generally avoided or became the butt of jokes or even pranks. They better not try any of that when Tormod was around, he decided.

The truth was that these were not the kind of people he identified with, but they were the kind of people who identified with him, and that was the best he could hope for. Only a few nerds still existed in a valley that had exported its brainiest kids for generations, and they were typically fat, slow, weak, clumsy, insecure and barely even book smart. If each of them did not fulfill all of these criteria, then at least several. Tormod was smart, but that was it, and he was rarely seen with a book because he had already read it and remembered it. So the local nerds, if one can even call them that, had lumped him with the jocks from day one. Probably even from before school started, back when they heard about him working on the Aasen farm. He recalled the saying that "no good deed goes unpunished". It seemed that for him, no good use of his power ever went unpunished. And part of his punishment, he decided, was being here, surrounded by poorly educated muscle-users on a boring soccer field in the end of September, when he could have been zooming over the mountain ridges at 80 kilometers an hour, or explored the world through the Interwebs.

Chapter 27: Last Lina of defense

Soccer, or football as it was called on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, was not really that difficult. Tormod was in principle stationed near the middle of the field, but spent much of his time running back and forth between there and the area near the opponents' goal. Whenever his team was on the offensive, he would run forward. At first, he would usually run without the ball, waiting for someone to pass the ball to him so he could shoot at the goal or preferably pass it to one of the dedicating attackers who would then score the goal. But occasionally he would run with the ball, which was a bit more challenging.

Tormod had no practice with dribbling and tackling and the various ways of getting the ball away from another player, much less how to keep another player from taking it if he came close enough. So his tactic was to avoid them at all costs. Luckily people who wanted to take the ball from him were very focused. When he was running forward, obviously they could not just run straight at him, unless they stood right in front of him. They would have to estimate where they had to run to to intercept him. And since this was on the top of their mind, he could sense it without stopping to concentrate. So he would simply change his course or speed, so that they did not get too close to him, until he had run at least most of the distance. Then he would pass to one of the attackers, if they were around.

In addition, while he was slower than many of the players during the first half hour or so, he was the fastest player on the field toward the end of the game. Even if they tried to catch up with him, they were too winded and tired to do so during a long run. So over the course of October, he would increasingly be the one running with the ball. He also had an uncanny ability to know where a pass was going as soon as the boot hit it, whether it was a pass to him or to an opponent, and to be at the right place at the right time. Surprisingly for someone who looked like he was 15, he was becoming a key player during the practices. The captain decided it was time to take him out for an actual competition with another municipality.

This was not really something he had planned for. He had not done anything obviously supernatural, and had thought that this would be enough for them to get fed up with him. He was after all not particularly knowledgable and did not have much technique. He was not even enthusiastic. He just showed up, ran where he was expected to, and then ran back.

"OK, we'll have you on the field from the start of the game" said the captain. "For the first thirty minutes, you just run back and forth like a fool: Forward when we're on the offensive, back when we are not. Kite the defenders as much as possible. We are not trying hard to score at that time, but our defenders will do their best to keep our goal clean. Then after about twenty minutes, you start slowing down. They will think you are

tired like any normal person. Then after half an hour, we do your thing, where you run with the ball from the back of the midfield to just in front of the goal, and Ivar scores. You should be able to outrun them at that point, and we will control the rest of the game, except perhaps the first ten to fifteen minutes after the pause."

They went out on the field, and Tormod noticed for the first time how much people there were. He had expected the sports-interested students from the high school, and a smaller number from the other school. But there were far more than that. There were middle-schoolers, kids, parents, teachers, and people he had no idea who was. Evidently school matches were prime entertainment up here in the valleys. His own mother was there too, but he knew she was not there to cheer him on, quite the contrary: She was going to make sure he did not unfairly use his alien wizard powers to win the game all by himself and become the star of the day. Well, he should be able to avoid that. Soccer was a team sport, after all.

The plan worked like a charm. Tormod did not even use his telekinesis to adjust the direction of the ball just a tiny bit, as he had sometimes done during practice. He knew his mother was watching him like an eagle, and stuck to the boring routine of wearing out the opponents. And it worked too. From half an hour into the game, the rest of his team woke up and took the battle to the opponents. They won a crushing 5-1 victory. The whole team danced and cheered, and so did their supporters, but not Tormod. He could read the minds of the other team and feel the bitter taste of defeat even though they had done their best. If he had been an ordinary human, they might have won, or at least the scales would have been more even. He was making people happy, but he was also making people unhappy, so why was he really making an effort? It was not like he was making a living out of this, or even having much fun.

After the game, the players were pretty worn out, except for Tormod, and he did his best to hide that. But they were happy, and supporters came and congratulated them. The star of the day was Ivar, who scored four of the goals, and the captain who led the team to victory, but Tormod also got a lot of praise for his obvious role in wearing down the other team. "He's like the Energizer Bunny" boasted Erik, the captain. "I have no idea how long he can keep running. Probably all night. I've never seen anything like it. He is born to run."

"If only I could fly" said Tormod meekly.

"It's not far off" said Ivar. "Seeing you run with that ball was just supernatural, you know. Like you have some kind of guardian angel keeping everyone away from you."

"Who knows what I have" said Tormod. "There is more between heaven and earth." Not to mention all the other earths... Well, he better not mention them.

In the next soccer match, they faced a team who had heard about Tormod and their new strategy. He could feel that because they all thought of it when they saw him. His opponents had decided on a strategy on their own to avoid the problem: They would play offensively, keeping the game entirely on their opponents' half of the field for the first half of the match. That way Tormod would not have the chance to tire out their

defense and midfield players. It was a perfect strategy, except for being completely idiotic. If it was possible to confine the game to the opponents' side, then every team would do it every time, and every team would win every game. That obviously doesn't compute. In the same league, teams are of at least vaguely similar strength. And that means you can't decide the play on your own: The other team won't let you.

And that is how the master plan fell apart after about five minutes. Without a backup plan that was well researched and practiced, they had to choose between getting tired after all, or just standing there as Tormod put the ball pretty much at the foot of Ivar. After the first two goals they restricted themselves to clustering around Ivar, and Tormod put the ball in himself. After that they reverted to normal gameplay, which they actually did reasonably well, but the game had already pretty much fallen apart for them. The final result was 6-0. The only reason the crowd did not go wild was that Tormod's team was playing away from home, and most of the onlookers cheered for the home team. But they did not cheer very much toward the end.

Later in the evening after the game, Erik the team captain called Tormod. They were going to have a celebration of their winning streak on Friday evening, mostly the team and some girls, and expected him to be there. "After all, we couldn't have done this well without you" Erik admitted. He was almost certainly right about that.

"That may not be such a good idea" said Tormod's mother when he mentioned it. "That kind of parties tend to include lots and lots of alcohol. If you're lucky it may be only beer, but it is not uncommon for there to be spirits. We don't know anything about how you handle that kind of stuff. After all, you're only half Earthling."

"I have already drunk coffee without any ill effects. I seem to be more resistant to everything than everyone, so chances are alcohol will be the same."

"That is a very risky attitude. Alcohol weakens the brain in particular, which is why people like it. But your powers are probably tied to your brain, since the mind is. That means if you get drunk, you may lose your powers and revert to a normal 15 year old for the duration. If you got into any trouble, you would not be able to defend yourself. Not to mention the risk that you might reveal something about yourself while drunk that you would not have let slip when sober."

"But living my whole life without alcohol is not very realistic, is it? It is widespread in society."

"There are numerous teetotalers in the world, and with good reason. Not to say there is any connection, but the ancient Jewish hero Samson, who was born after a visit by an angel and had superpowers, never drank alcohol even though it was mandatory in Jewish society. His mother was specifically instructed to never let him drink wine or strong drink."

"Jesus Christ, on the other hand, supposedly was somewhat famous for drinking wine. I don't think anyone has proposed that the wine at his Last Supper was why he died the next day. In fact, the religion implies that it was the other way around."

"Now that you mention it, he did die the next day. I'd rather not see that happen to you."

"I don't have high-ranking religious and political opponents waiting to crucify me, though. At least not yet. If that ever happens, I intend to be very very careful. One savior

of that type is enough, I think."

"So, you staying home?"

"Nah. I'm going to buy some beer and test at home what happens."

In the end, Tormod went to the party. His experiment had shown that he was in fact more resistant to alcohol than other people, just like he was more resistant to other toxins. He had been out all summer without getting a sunburn, after all, and he had not had a food poisoning in a couple years now. On the other hand, he seemed to have a harder time healing poisoning than wounds, and alcohol did decrease his abilities if he drank enough to get tipsy. He would have to be quite careful, but did not need to stay away from the stuff entirely. His mother took note. "Samson was instructed to never drink wine or strong drink. Perhaps beer is OK."

"I think you are just improvising by now" he had said. But it seemed like a good advice anyway.

And so at the party, Tormod drank beer, but slowly. He spent a lot of time talking with people while holding a bottle of beer, but he only sipped at it occasionally. Not everyone had that kind of restraint. As the evening wore on, some of them got drunk enough that they started behaving strangely. Or perhaps that was what they wanted anyway, and the drink was an excuse they used. Tormod had not felt any urge to behave differently even when he had drunk so much that he warped into the wrong room. And he certainly did not do so now.

It should not have surprised him that as the alcohol content increased, the boys got steadily bolder around the girls, and in most cases the other way around as well. Perhaps that was why they were there, after all. It seemed unlikely that they would go to a party with a bunch of male soccer players and not expect some flirting at the very least. But it might also be that each particular girl might have favorites among the players - although none of them were girlfriends at the time, at least - and they might be less interested in advances from other players than their favorites. That said, alcohol seemed to be somewhat of an equalizer in that regard.

Strangely, the girl who flirted the least was the one who also drank the most, or at least the fastest. By the time she started to get disoriented, he discouraged her from drinking more right now. Even so, half an hour later she was fast asleep. And then some, he thought. Judging from her aura, she was not in danger of actually dying: He had seen enough auras by now to be a pretty good judge of that. But she was sleeping abnormally deeply, to the point where she did not really wake up when Ivar started unbuttoning her blouse. Some of those around cheered him on. Tormod did not.

"Dude, let her be. Nothing good can come from stripping a girl while you're both drunk."

"Kid, if you don't like girls, just look another way."

"I like girls, that is why I won't let you just do what you want to them."

Ivar stopped undressing Lina and turned to Tormod. "Oh, you won't let me? What are you going to do?"

"Take her home. She doesn't seem like she's going to walk home on her own, so..."

"Listen, kid. You don't *let me* do anything. I've had it with you pretending to be so awesome. I do what I want to do, and if you don't like it, you get out of here."

"I am getting out of here. And I'm taking her with me."

"No, you are not. If you want her, you can get the sloppy seconds after me."

"Well, at least you make your intentions clear. But I'm still taking her home. To her home, not mine, because I am not like you."

"I'm starting to get enough of your 'holier than you' attitude."

"It doesn't take much to be holier than you. Common decency is enough, it seems."

"OK, I tried to warn you, kid. I am the ace of the soccer team, and you're just some little rat running around on the field distracting the other players. You think you can take me on? Come on. Let's decide this like men, with our fists. Whoever wins gets the girl."

"I don't want to hurt you, but if that's the only way to keep you from humping a sleeping girl, so be it. Are you guys fine with this?"

Nobody said anything.

Tormod started walking toward Lina. Ivar stepped in front of him, fists in front of him like a boxer. Tormod suddenly moved his left arm from along his side straight out from the body. The sudden movement triggered the other boy, who had been all tense and prepared to start fighting. He lunged with his right fist aiming for Tormod's jaw. Tormod had already seen in his thoughts what he was planning, and besides time moved at half speed for him. He slid back, grabbed the bigger boy's arm and pulled him forward, throwing him on the floor.

Ivar got up, white with rage. "You little cheater! I'm gonna beat you to a pulp."

"I'm trying to NOT hurt you more than..."

The other threw himself at him like an angry bull. Tormod once again slipped narrowly away and gave the other boy an extra push that caused him to lose his balance and crash into the furniture. That got to hurt a bit, lucky thing the 'ace' was a sturdy boy.

This time Ivar just swore, but the anger in his mind was over the top. He realized he was being made to look a fool. He did not hold back at all anymore. If he hit ...

Unless I am actually invulnerable. He remembered the mysterious thin layer of invisible armor that had protected him from needles and the edge of a knife. There was far more power in these attacks, but there were no sharp edges. He was not too drunk to heal himself if he failed, but he dared not risk take a hit to his head. He covered his face with his arms, leaving his stomach open, but tightening his gut muscles as hard as he could. *Invulnerability, please work now.* He could feel the other boy's intention move to his open spot. Then the fist came, fast and hard.

The fist did not really connect. Well, there was a sense of push, as if the punch had hit an invisible steel plate that was pressed against his body, shoving him a little bit back, but that was it. Ivar grimaced - clearly he too had felt the steel plate.

"This is going to hurt you a lot more than it hurts me" Tormod said. Ivar swung his other fist, but this time Tormod slid a little aside and hit the arm hard. The larger boy grimaced in pain and grabbed his arm on reflex. Tormod hit the other arm with lightning speed - OK, not literally, but about as fast as he could - and Ivar screamed. Tormod pulled him forward, threw him face down on the floor, and stepped on his back. For good measure he added the full pressure of his telekinesis. It could lift over 60 kilos

these days. Right now it pressed down with the same strength, in addition to his weight.

"I used to be small and weak and clumsy and slow" he said. "I got better. I have worked hard. I told you I love Japanese culture. I have learned Japanese fighting: Judo, Karate, Bushido. I could kill a man if I am not careful. But I would not want to do that. You used to be a teammate. I don't see you as an enemy, just some guy who've drunk too much and unleashed his inner douchebag. But I'm not running with this pack again. You were all standing there while he started taking the clothes off a helpless girl. Even you girls did not say anything.

"I don't fit in with you folks. I don't know if Lina does, but if so, she will be back. I will not, so she will get her chance then to get undressed and who knows what else by random guys while she sleeps. But not today."

He stepped off Ivar, draped the limp girl over his shoulder, and strode out. No one tried to stop him.

Chapter 28: Humans are crazy

"That is the most stupidest thing I have heard. I've heard the sheep say more reasonable things, like 'Baah!'" Silje glared at her friend. "What in the world would Tormod do with a naked girl in the middle of the night?"

"Well, what do boys usually do with naked girls in the middle of the night?"

"This is Tormod we are talking about. He does not even slap my ass when I bend over right in front of him, and I've tried several times. Besides, and more importantly, he called me at 22:13 that night, asking for the way to Lina's home. He had just left the party with her. At the end of the call, he said: 'Her ride is here'. So he probably took her right home. He also didn't say anything about nekkidity, not that it would ... Wait, he did. He said that they had tried to take off some kind of clothing but didn't have time, and he added that it did not matter since he had X-ray vision when it came to clothes. So she was not naked and he didn't care."

"He called you?"

"Why not? We are neighbors and friends. He know that I have the hots for him, I can see it in his eyes, but he doesn't do anything about it. So I really doubt he'd reconsider his ride and hare off into the night to peel the clothes off some unconscious girl. Even if she is more sexy than me - and that doesn't take much, I realize that - he is just not the type to take advantage of girls like that."

"A little beer can make a bit difference."

"To him? You really don't know him. Why listen to rumors when we can ask him? Let me get him on hangout here."

"Hi Silje!"

"Hiya! I hope you don't mind, but it's about Lina."

"The naked chick whose curvaceous derriere I cuddled all through the night way back in October?"

"You did??"

"Of course not. I called you, remember? If you ask the other girls who were there what time I left, and ask her parents when I arrive, you will learn just how fast I zipped from there to there, and also that she was in the same state of not really undress when she arrived as when I picked her up. She had lost her sweater and her shirt had been unbuttoned, but I could not watch that from the angle I was seeing her. She did have a nice backside though, have you considered eating more ice cream?"

"I just burn it all off on the farm work. Sorry to not provide you with a beautiful view."

"It's OK, I am glad for every day I manage to delay seeding this mudball with my freckled little offspring."

"Mudball?"

"It's geek for planet. Megalomaniac galactic conquerors like to refer to Earth as a pathetic mudball which they and their brood will rule forever, and then the earthlings take them down."

"I understood half of that. You are having an unhealthy influence on me."

"Anyway, rest assured that I am not going to cuddle up with some random girl this school year without first offering you the chance. You're my best friend after all. Well, after my mom. So if you want to cuddle, just call me and I'll come over as soon as I have time."

"Don't say crazy things that will give people the wrong ideas!"

"People? Your parents are both cheering me on. I wonder how long before your dad ties you up and wraps you in gift paper for me. Or is there anyone else listening? Your beautifully tanned face is redder than usual."

"I have no idea how you found out that she was here, but this is not how you talk to me usually."

"I have a sixth sense. Besides, you talk differently."

"So is there anything we can do about these rumors?"

"Me, I'm making fun of them. You, I'm not sure, you could try telling people the truth, but I can't offhand think of any time when humans have preferred a boring truth over a juicy rumor."

"This is crazier than crazy! You were doing almost 150 kilometers an hour there. How were you even able to breathe? Do you even need to breathe now?"

"Of course I do! Flying is pretty much my only real superpower. Well, and I can lift more than my own weight with my mind, evidently. I think it is the same thing that powers the two, because they are way off the scale of everything else I can do."

"So, how did you get that fast?"

"I have found a way to focus my telekinesis - the thing I move stuff with - into a forcefield and shape it into a cone in front of my. I got the idea because I used the diving position, splitting the air with my hands. This works the same way only better. As long as I can keep them both running, I can go crazy fast. Faster than a speeding car. Well, faster than some speeding cars. I wonder what the upper limit is to this if I keep practicing."

"Perhaps there is no upper limit. Perhaps one day you will just pop from one part of the planet to another just like that. Or even to the moon."

"I am sure Earth is a pretty sight from there, but that's a few centuries off, I think."

"Anyway, it is pretty important no one discovers that you can do this, or it's Area 52 for you."

"You don't need to tell me, mom. Oh, and it's Area 51."

They walked back toward the house. They were both wearing boots in the deep snow.

"Your flying is not the only power that has grown" said his mother. "Your heat vision is much stronger too. You grill food in half the time it used to take last year when you first came here."

"I can't believe it is just a year since I saw this place for the first time! In fact, it is still some days till the time I came here last year. But it feels like half a lifetime ago."

"Yes, because you have changed so much. But to me, time is still flying by, the days like leaves on a windy day in fall. It is only two years since we celebrated our last

Christmas in my childhood home. At the time you were still too weak to heal her. And I was worried sick every day you were not there, because my baby was living in another town several hours away."

"It wasn't even a town, it was out in the countryside!"

"And the next year, suddenly you were on the west coast of America!"

"It feels like a different lifetime! Yoga, Reiki, Crystal Children, holding hands with that autistic girl because it was the only way to read thoughts back then. Now I can sense people's thoughts from over a hundred meters away! And it's still growing."

"Still think your flying is way off everything else you can do?"

"Well, it's not like I actually *need* to read the thoughts of people a hundred meters away. Mostly no one thinks about me at that distance anyway. Most of the minds I read are at school, and I am still learning to shut them out. I am getting better, but there's all kind of crazy stuff."

"That's because humans are crazy, baby."

"Yeah. But, you know, some of it is pretty embarrassing."

"If people knew that someone could read their mind, they would think differently."

"Think before you think!"

School went on Christmas break, and Tormod helped his mother bake cookies for the holidays. Tradition required there to be seven different sorts, and his mother had managed this every year, despite working. This year she had a good helper baking them with his heat vision. It had taken him some practice to heat the surface slightly more than the inside, to give them that realistic finish. But it was fun, practicing his powers on something actually useful. He wish he could do that more. He wished he were free to use his powers all the time. It made him feel good. It made him feel super, actually.

He wished he could just warp around the house - he could warp from any room to any other by now - without having to put on a trenchcoat and cap and blur his face. He wished he could fly to school. He wished he could exchange thoughts freely with those of his classmates and other schoolmates that he got along with. He wished he could heal their head cold and stomach aches like he had done in California. He wished he could be himself and no one would hold it against him, no one would be scared, no one would come to capture and dissect him. But that was not the kind of world he lived in. Only here, in his mother's kitchen, was he free for a short time to be himself.

He still sometimes got hangout requests from his friends in America, but it was pretty rare by now. Part of it was that they lived in different time zones, so by the time they were at their most social, he had been asleep for hours already. But even apart from that, time was steadily tearing them apart. He had a hard time understanding his mother's claims that time was flying by, that his powers seemed to grow like a flower opening up from one day to the next. He did not really notice much difference, until the thought back and remembered how things had been. The Crystal Child they thought they knew was already fading. The child he had been a year before that was just a memory. And the small, weak, clumsy and helpless boy he had been for most of his childhood was like a dream, like a story he had read long ago about someone else.

But Christmas was still the same. The same cookies, the same Christmas dinner, the same decorations on the tree every year. In a world of constant change, it was a constant constant instead, like a brief glimpse of eternity. And perhaps that was what Christmas was meant to be.

"When I first looked into your eyes" his mother told him, "I saw eternity in them."

He wondered if he would ever see anything like that.

"Half a year left of high school" said Tormod's mother on New Years' Eve. "What are you going to do after that? I know you talked about programming, but now that your powers have grown by leaps and bounds, perhaps you are having second thoughts. I mean, Clark Kent became a reporter to know before everyone else when something was going on, for instance."

"Clark Kent is a fictional character, mom."

"The logic still seems sound. Not that I particular want you to play superhero yet. When you can withstand the impact of an armor-piercing rocket, that may be a good time to start taking on the kind of problems that make the news."

"I agree."

"But how about becoming a doctor so you can heal patients? Besides with your mind reading skills, you will have a head start on the diagnosis. Let alone the X-ray vision. You are pretty much a shoo-in for that career, and you have the grades to make it to the medicine studies straight from high school, if you keep it up."

"Mom, my healing sucks. I can fly and warp from one end of the house to the other, but I can't heal much worse than a stomach ache. Well, and injuries."

"Including old injuries like a broken spine."

"That's a bit of a special case. But more importantly, hospitals are teeming with some of the country's most intelligent, educated and scientifically minded people. They are also under constant observation by economists, politicians and the press, all of them trying to improve the health and reduce the cost. If one particular part of one particular hospital starts standing out, they will converge on it like vultures. Dissection follows."

"Psychologist? Lawyer? Your mind reading would give you an edge."

"I don't think the defense 'I know my client is innocent because I read his mind' would fly in court."

"But if you could see where the corpse and the murder weapon were hidden, that would fly in court."

"Actually for that I might just as well be on the front lines as a cop. In Norway, the chance of getting shot in duty is extremely low, and I'm already invulnerable to fists and knives. I'd get alerted even before the news of crime and also some other tragedies like accidents and fires and some natural disasters."

"It's an ugly job, but someone's got to do it. I just worry that you won't like the job, and not some of the people who are drawn to it."

"I probably won't. I was just theorizing what I could do to make the world a better place. Perhaps I should wait with that and just try to blend in?"

On the first school day of the new year, there was a visitor, and he was thinking of Tormod. So much so that Tormod knew what the guy was planning to say before they even met. But he still had to hear him out, at least to some degree.

"Hello, my name is Daniel Arnesen. I take it you are Tormod Øygard?"

"Perhaps you've got the wrong skinny 19 year old looking like 15 with signal red hair and signal green eyes."

Arnesen blinked, it took some time for him to process the irony when Tormod wore his poker face. Then he forced a small laugh. "I've watched a video recording of your soccer teams first two matches this year."

"We live in an amazing time, when the hobbies of teenagers can waste the time of responsible adults."

"Actually, I don't think I am wasting my time..."

"I think so. I have quit the team. I got fed up with running after a ball, and did not like the milieu."

"You clearly have a talent for running."

"Actually I have seen many people running faster than me."

"But not for as long."

"There are hundreds of thousands of people running marathon, something I have never done."

"Perhaps you would like it. Or if not marathon, then ten kilometers. Did you know that you can actually make a career running? Earning real money?"

"That does not inspire faith in humanity. Running in circles is an activity fitting for preschoolers."

"Or you could combine a running career with higher education. Avoid expensive student loans."

"Why do I have the feeling that I would be yelled at if I was reading a textbook while running? Why do I have the feeling that I will fail if I show up at exams without having read the textbook? The day has only 24 hours for most of us." *Excepting someone who can jump more than 7 minutes backward in time, but even I get exhausted from doing that repeatedly.*

"I would like you to at least consider it. Here is my contact information."

"I am sorry that you wasted your time and money coming here. But a simple email could have saved you both. It may well be that, with practice, I could become the greatest runner the world has ever seen. Then I would be remembered for decades or even centuries as a man whose greatest accomplishment in life was to run in circles. I would rather not be remembered at all, if it is up to me. Which I believe it is. Have a nice day."

As Tormod's mother had pointed out, his times of decision were almost upon him. If he wanted to join the Police Academy, he would have to apply by March 1. That felt like ages away, but his mother acted like it was next week. Then there was the question of

military service. Norway had general military service for all men - soon to be extended to women, but not this year - but only 8000 of about 60 000 potential recruits were actually needed. Tormod easily cleared the hurdles for health, intelligence and a clean criminal record. Even though he had not given his all on the physical tests, he had surely scored in the top 25%. It was nor possible to convincingly fake less. The stamina tests in particular used objective measures such as heart rate and oxygen uptake, and he was bound to ace those whether he wanted to or not. If these had showed that he did not even begin to exert himself, it would have cause suspicion.

To be honest, he was not sure what he felt about military service. He assumed that he would never actually be commanded to go to war and kill people. Norway was not that kind of country, unless it was attacked, which was extremely unlikely: Norway was a member of NATO, together with the USA, Canada and most EU countries. An attack on one NATO country was an attack on all, and "all" in this case meant well over half of the world's firepower. Only an extreme death wish could cause any nation to actually invade a NATO country. So Norway's military was mostly for show and just in case, plus a small contingent of voluntary soldiers operating abroad in NATO operations against terrorists and such.

Crawling around playing soldier for a full year seemed like a waste of perfectly good time. But he had more time than anyone else on the planet, unless things went horribly wrong. He had to wait anyway while his powers developed. And having spent a year in the military was likely to count in his favor when applying for the Police Academy. So it was not a big problem. The big problem was that it was hopeless to plan his near future when the State might randomly grab a year of it, and did not even bother to tell him for sure in advance.

His fellow students seemed for the most part unconcerned. But then they might simply lack the brainpower for such concern. They might also in many cases lack the brainpower for tertiary education and, as a consequence, most kinds of employment. This part of the land has bled its brains to the cities for three generations now, and it showed. The social groups he had formerly called Nerd and Striver were both shrunk to small sects, with the rest being Jocks (mostly) and some Black Sheep. The line between the last two was actually a bit blurry, as his unfortunate experience at the Soccer Team Party had shown. It was this blur that had caused him to back slowly away from the Jock faction and thereby from most of the social life for the young people in the valley.

"Look mom, no hands! And no face either!"

"You're taking after your old man, you know that?"

"That's what I'm trying. So what do you think?"

"Mirror glasses. I can still see your green eyes when I see you from the front."

"How about you buy me a pair of Ray-Bans?"

"As soon as I win the lottery."

"You are not even playing the lottery. I wonder if I could win that. I do have precognitions sometimes, although I can't control them yet."

"That may be for the best. Knowing the future seems like a terrible affliction even for

a semi-demigod."

"So if not Ray-Ban, some other stylish glasses? Not too dark because I won't be using them only outdoors."

"I'll be looking for something. But jolly good job with the light-weave. The last few months you have been little more than a shadow when blurred, but I think this is the first time you've disappeared completely. Well, except for your eyes."

"I need those eyes to see with, since my second sight is still less than a meter."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll find something. Hopefully you won't actually need this for the next week or two."

February was bitterly cold here up in the mountain valleys, although at least it was a dry cold. Tormod had avoided flying, even though he could keep the wind away with the force field cone and heat himself with his microwave vision. It was just too much trouble. The last time he tried he had probably been over 200 kilometer and hour, which was just insane. He did not really need to practice anymore now for a while. The speed was already incredible. But now...

"You know, mom, now that I am invisible, I could fly to school. No one would see me. I could warp out of the house, fly invisible to the school, warp inside and turn visible inside a toilet stall or something. I would be there in a fraction of the time and no one would see me!"

"That is the problem. No one would see you on the bus, and they would ask how you got there. What were you going to say?"

"You drove me because it was too cold to stand outside waiting for the bus?"

"AS IF! What am I, a helicopter parent?"

"Now that you mention it..."

"Baby, I kicked you out the week after you got out of middle school. I let you go to a boarding school the next year, and then to America. I am letting you go to weird-ass parties where you get in fistfights. I'm letting you stay with your not-a-girlfriend until 23 in the night. Who are you going to fool into thinking that I am driving you to school suddenly? My coworkers? Because I am going to be there with them at the time, most days. At the same time that you are going to school. Even you can't be two places at the same time, I suspect. I certainly can't."

"Could my dad be two places at the same time?"

"If so, he never told me. Probably not. But I think he could move at the speed of lightning or something, so he managed anyway."

"Well, I got a ways to go yet then. I can only fly 200 kilometers per hour."

"Actually I think it was the warp thing he used. Perhaps in time you are going to stop flying and start warping everywhere."

"So far I can only warp about 7 meters, 15 if I concentrate, but then there is a risk that I end up in the wrong place with a headache."

"Well, wait a millennium or two and I am sure your range will increase."

Chapter 29: Lifeseeker

Tormod had applied for the Police Academy, a district college on the south coast with informatics, and the NTNU, Norway's University of Science and Technology where he might study engineering. He had not really needed a third choice: He might be rejected from the Police Academy because they had an interview process assessing people's personalities as well, and his personality was that of a lone wolf. But there was no way he would be rejected from a district college. His preliminary grades were through the roof. His military assessment was supposedly hidden from him, but he had easily been able to read the mind of the testers. He had an IQ of 160 then, and it was probably higher now, even if not by much. Grades was the least of his worries. People were almost all of his worries. No matter how smart you are, you'll never understand people.

"Mom? You got back pain again? Let me fix that."

"There's no hiding things from you, is there?" She took his hand, and closed her eyes as the healing energy washed over her, washing away every trace of pain. "The next time, perhaps we should practice holding back and only doling out a small bit of healing each time. After all, other healers don't usually fix everything instantly. If you heal people a little bit at a time, it will be less impressive. I don't want you on the front page of the newspapers like that Snåsa Man."

"Well, the experts still say he's a fraud."

"Even so, avoiding front pages is a good thing."

"Yes mom. I am sure sooner or later you will get sick again, and I'll try to only heal you a little bit. Although I have no idea how to do that."

"I am sure you'll figure something out."

"You could try to eat some of that salad that's been in the back of the fridge for the last month. I am sure that will make you sick."

"I am sure something will come up without us having to prod it with a stick."

"So then I can throw away the salad?"

Apart from episodes like this, things were pretty quiet. March was still a full winter month up here, and Easter wasn't until the middle of April this year. The thought-storm after the Lina incident had faded after a month's time. Even the six girls and one boy who had entertained fantasies about Tormod carrying them off in various states of undress and/or helplessness had mostly moved on to other targets. Novelty is the spice of life for teens after all, and things that happened four months ago and more hardly qualify as novelty at that age. Besides, when nothing more happened between Lina and Tormod, the small town gradually fell back to the original theory that he and Silje were an item and that he might yet settle down and take over the farm. Silje did nothing to directly discourage this idea, and her father did a great deal to promote it.

Tormod's classmates were beginning to look forward to the spring's "russ" celebration. This was a particular Norwegian tradition, as he found out when he went to a Californian high school. They had nothing quite like it, although they did have school

balls. This was a different beast by orders of magnitude. The "russ" - a name that high school seniors acquired in spring, from the Latin phrase "depositurus cornua", to lay off the horns - spent their free time a month and more in constant partying, road trips, festivals and various bizarre but mostly harmless stunts, varying from climbing local statues to crawling on all fours the length of the shopping street and biting the legs of people passing by. The celebration ended on May 17th, Norway's national day, leaving the poor students a few days to desperately try to catch up with all the studying they had not done in the past weeks.

The excessive partying seemed pretty crazy to Tormod, but then so did the colorful feathers of the peacock male. Perhaps they had a similar evolutionary reason. Certainly it was not unknown for the "russ" events to jumpstart the next generation. Tormod felt pretty safe from that though, as his backing away from the sports milieu had created a safe distance to the wildest celebrations.

In March this celebration had not yet begun, but students were already planning it in great detail. Anything to avoid studying, Tormod guessed. After almost 13 years of compulsory education, it was small wonder people started to get fed up. That said, there were a few who were working all the harder now that their next goal was in sight. But they were a minority.

"Mom, isn't this exactly the kind of stuff I am supposed to stop?" Tormod handed her his slate. The news were dominated by the murder of a teen girl. Of course it was not here in the valleys, but it was in eastern Norway, closer to the capital.

"I don't think we can ever stop it all, but perhaps in time you will be able to make such things even more rare."

"I think one day I can stop it, at least within a certain radius. Mom, I can already jump back in time a whole hour."

"What? An hour back in time? Baby, is that even possible?"

"I discovered that back when I was being chased around. Somehow I am able to jump back in time a short stretch. Lately this has increased again. It takes a lot out of me, but luckily I recover quickly. So if I got to know it quickly enough, I might be able to jump back in time and prevent it from happening in the first place!"

"That's incredible! But if you prevented it from happening, wouldn't you prevent yourself from knowing that it would happen, and therefor from jumping back in time, so it would happen anyway?"

"No, I keep my memories. I am not sure how this works, but there is a scientific theory that the universe is branching and that is why there are many parallel Earths. So perhaps by jumping back in time I enter a different timeline, one in which I may just be able to prevent it!"

"Well, even if you worked in the police, you would not have been able to get there in time. You may be able to fly fast, but not THAT fast."

"True. I would only be able to stop crimes or accidents within a certain radius. But three years from now, when I am finishing Police Academy, I will hopefully be able to fly

faster and jump further in time. Either would work."

"So if you had been able to jump this far back in October, you could have avoided the whole Lina incident?"

"I am not sure. I mean, I already tried to warn her to not drink so much. I am not sure she would have listened to me in time. Once she blacked out, I would probably still have had to fight to get her home. I am not sure. Perhaps it would have worked. If I had found a time after she started feeling bad and before she blacked out, I might have been able to convince her to let me take her home. Probably not though."

"Oh well. But it just shows that sometimes power is not enough. Humans will still be humans."

"True. And I am not sure I should even try to create a society where no crime or accident ever happen. People will start jumping off buildings because they know Superman will be there to catch them. But then there are cases like this. I wish I could have done something."

"Yeah. But you are not a god, baby. Just a semi-demigod. You can't carry the weight of the world."

April was STILL winter. This was something Tormod was not used to. It had not been like that in California, of course, but also not on the south coast. Global warming or not, this was clearly a different climate zone! But at least it was milder now, more like winter in the lowlands. And the locals did not all hate the winter. The tourists streaming to the skiing hotels and mountain cabins were boosting the economy: These were usually upper middle class and sometimes more than that, and had money to burn. Tourism had been steadily growing and stood for much of the district's income. Between the mountain tourists and the travelers passing through, outsiders provided most of the jobs. Without them, the whole society here would fall apart. The remaining farms would not be enough to maintain a viable society and would probably also have to give up. But luckily there was no sign of tourism slowing down yet, quite the opposite.

Looking at the news from last year, Tormod found something quite unsettling. There was nothing he could do about that now, but the future was another matter. He started asking around. He started reading the minds of people who knew people. And he asked a few friendly souls for help. He might not be as popular as he had been, but he still knew some people who liked him or at least respected him, or owed him a favor. He set his trap, and waited. Easter was the most likely time. He kept his winter jacket ready, his new blue-tinted half-mirror sunglasses in its inner pocket. And then, one peaceful afternoon, his trap went off.

His mite chimed the hangout sound. It was Lina. He had been surprised to hear that her father was part of this, he had seemed like a very average worker.

"He used to be a farmboy" Lina had said. She had raised her eyebrows. "You know, like Silje, except a boy. He knows the terrain up there better than almost anyone around here. He is strong. He has learned first aid. And he knows how to drive."

Now was the time. "Is it about your father?" he asked, without any formalities.

"Yeah. They got an alert. I promised to tell you. He's suiting up now."

"Thank you, Lina."

"I guess I owe you that much at least" she said. But he was already warping to the hallway, grabbing his winter jacket. He concentrated briefly, making himself invisible. Then warped through the outer wall and took off, accelerating eastward faster than a speeding motorbike.

It is amazing how fast you can get from one side of the valley to the other when you fly in a straight line at a speed of over 200 kilometer per hour. Lina's father was in the car already, and Tormod could only get to his surface thoughts. The man was on his way to the meet-up, and much as Tormod would love to pick his brain, he dared not delve deeper into it while the other was driving as fast as he dared on the wintry road. But at least he could clearly see in his mind where the meetup was, because that was foremost on his mind. Tormod sped off again, and arrived at the meeting place long before the car. There were a number of serious men gathered already, readying the snow scooters.

The first man he checked was also too preoccupied, but the next two were easy pickings. He could read their most recent memories without any further prompting. They had all been called here up on the mountain proper, not far from the hotel, to start searching for a woman in her 40es who had been reported missing while skiing along a well-marked route. The wind had picked up and whipped up a lot of snow, so she might have lost the markers. Or she might have tried to take a shortcut, in which case she might be far off course already. Worst case she might already be frozen to death. If not, every minute counted. But finding her would be hard unless she was close to the marked path. If she had wandered off, she would be very difficult to find. A helicopter was on its way, but the scooters were still essential. The more, the better - as long as they too didn't get lost!

Tormod memorized the route that the woman was supposed to have taken. He was not a local here, but he had been flying quite a bit up there over the months he had stayed in the valley, so he had a rough idea of where things were. Gogool maps would have to help with the rest. Now he had no more time to waste. Actually, he had time to gain. Concentrating, he closed his eyes. He could feel reality slipping and then reconnecting. As he opened his eyes again, he was at home, working on an OOUC, an open online university course on the Interweb. He was approximately an hour in the past, but with the memories of the later time still fresh in his mind. Time to check the maps and then take off for the mountains.

A couple minutes later, he was once again grabbing the winter clothes, making himself invisible, and flying. But this time he was flying up toward the mountains. He was moving at a dizzying speed, a conical force field splitting the air and increasingly the snow in front of him. The weather down in the valley had not been too bad. It was not actually snowing, but there was some wind whipping up loose snow. But up on the plateau, the wind was much stronger, and the air was like a dense white fog. He had to fly higher than he had planned: The sight was so bad, he risked colliding with a mountain

ridge. Force field or no, that would put a very quick end to his budding superhero career, and his life. So he had to ride above the thick of the wild white waves of snow, but below the dense gray clouds. The geolocation on his smartphone was lagging a little, but not much. Modern technology was awesome! Long before the Red Cross had even begun to alert its rescue teams, Tormod was slowing down and trying to trace the route the woman would have followed.

Unfortunately, with an X-ray radius of less than a meter, the chance of finding her in this weather was next to nothing. And unlike a helicopter or snowmobile, he did not make enough sound to alert her if he passed close. He tried calling, but his voice was swallowed up by the whirling snow. There was no sign of life. He could fly, he could protect himself against the weather and even heat himself. But if he could not find the victim of the storm and she could not find him, it was all in vain.

Unless my dad has left me any more powers that might help me save humans in a pinch...

He was like a stone sinking into a deep ocean, the whiteness turning dark as he closed his eyes and opened his mind ever further. The waves of his sinking spread in all directions, growing ever wider but even fainter. He became that ripple now, leaving the sinking stone of his body behind as he spread wider, wider. Becoming even more attenuated, he could no longer remember how he had come here. He could only remember his purpose. And then, even that slipped out of his grasp, the wave too faint for words.

But in the void, and in the silence, there was still a kind of knowledge, a faint awareness; awareness not of name or person, and not of memories of the past...

Wider. Wider. Wider.

A knowledge reached out into the absence, reached out into darkness, reached out into silence, and there were no bounds.

Wider. Wider. Wider.

An existence of only one dimension; but in the dark silence, and in the void of all sensation, something began to know...

Tiredness. Confusion. Vague memories of fear. But it was warmer now. She wanted to sleep. A small voice in her head told her not to, but she pushed it away. Then another small voice in her head whispered:

'Found you!'

Drawing back into himself was even harder than spreading out had been. But a memory of urgency pulled him, and became clearer as he began to fall back together to a person. Tormod. That was his name. He was human, yet special. He had come here to find who he had found. He had to remember that feeling, the direction where he had encountered it. That faint touch of another human soul.

He rose up from the snow. That way! That was not the marked route, but it was where his mind had touched hers. There was no doubt. He could not tell the distance - duration had been meaningless in that realm - but he could tell the direction from which he had withdrawn. He flew that way. After a while, he began 'listening' with his mind for

the activity of a mind, any mind, within his range. It required concentration, unlike passive reception when people thought of him. But he could do that much. Flying was more or less automatic now, and bending light away from himself had been pointless from the moment he flew into that white roiling wall of airborne snow. He slowed down, probing for a living mind. And then he felt it, and immediately recognized it as the one he had touched before. Tired, confused. Yep, this was it. He steered in that direction, and could feel it steadily closer as he slowed down. Time to hide himself again.

She had buried into a snowdrift, but perhaps a bit late. Her aura was faint with cold. She was alive but that would not continue for long unless something was done. Even if she did not cool down further, the process of shutting down the body and brain had begun, slowly but steadily. The heartbeat was getting erratic, the separation of the warm inner core from the cold limbs was failing as a feeling of warmth sent blood pulsing through her whole body again. Her eyes were closed, she would not have seen him even if he had been visible. But he could see her: A plain woman in her 40es, wearing decent winter clothes but not enough for a blizzard like this. She had lowered the hood but some vague awareness of what was happening had kept her from actually taking off the anorak even when she felt warm. Smart lady. Perhaps she would have lasted till the patrols found her. They were not yet alerted, though. Well, there was no reason why they should ever be.

"Don't worry, I have come to help you."

She forced her eyes open but of course did not see him.

"You cannot see me. It is best for all that I remain invisible."

"Who are you? What happened?"

"You got lost, I think. You are a bit off the track. I have come to take you back to the hotel."

He knew from the kitchen that his microwave vision could gently heat things by diffusing across a larger volume. Her volume was nearly as large as his own. He better get this right - boiling her would be a terrible idea, but he doubted he had that much firepower already. Just a gentle warmth all through her body...

"I cannot see anyone."

"You don't need to see me." He crouched in front of her. *'You don't even need to hear me.'*

"Are you an angel? I don't believe in angels." She sounded a little more coherent, but also a little more scared. Perhaps it was best to not thaw her up completely yet. If she thought he was an illusion, so much the better for the world.

'I have not come to test your faith but to rescue you from the storm. In this timeline, your time is not yet come.'

She gasped as he lifted her up in his arms. She could feel him alright, but still not see him. His lightweave was close to his body, hiding little more than his clothes. He could see part of her clothes also disappearing from view as they came too close to him. An optical illusion, nothing more.

'I am going to fly now. Don't make any sudden movements. It is going to get pretty fast. I will be holding you tight, but don't kick or squirm.'

She gasped again as she felt their ascent. The wind and snow parted before them as

he accelerated, more gently than usual, but eventually still reaching his maximum speed. The snow was a blur below them, spinning past at impossible speed.

"Are you taking me to Heaven? I don't believe in Heaven anymore."

'You say that as if I care about your belief. I only care about you. This is not your final judgment. When that time comes, perhaps your belief may help you. Or your actions. I do not know. I am not your judge now, nor will I ever be.'

"Who are you? What are you?"

'A helper.'

The wind quieted and the snow was much less dense when they approached the hotel. Tormod slowed down, then began heating her again. Her aura gradually began to regain its proper colors. He set her down on the road near the hotel parking lot.

'Go. Hurry and tell everyone that you are OK. Otherwise they will be searching for you and only find your skis.'

She stood shakily, then began to walk gingerly. She was still cold, but she would survive that handily. He drifted silently through the air, watching her as she began to move more confidently, more eagerly, to the hotel. He stayed outside. A riot of thoughts soon broke out inside. Good then. He sped into the air, high up above the snow, and turned toward home.

Chapter 30: Happily two months after

I WAS RESCUED BY AN ANGEL!

"Nice job!" Tormod's mother looked at the headline. "I could not have done it better myself!"

"Pretty obvious it was me, I guess?"

"To me, yeah. To anyone else, not until you accidentally make yourself invisible while someone is watching. If that ever happens, people will put the pieces together and we will both be in hot water."

"I am not going to let anything happen to you!"

"One day you may be able to follow up on that, but not this year. So be very, very careful about invisibility from now on."

"Humans have the attention span of a mayfly on acid, mom."

"If there is one thing you need to know about humans, it is that they are not all the same."

I know most people will not believe me when I say that an angel found me in the snow and flew me to the hotel. After all, angels don't exist. I even told him that I did not believe in angels. He seemed amused, and told me that he was not here to judge my faith, just to rescue me. Even while we were flying through the air, faster than a speeding car, I knew that it was impossible. An invisible man carrying me in his arms, speaking to me in my head? I knew that I had to be dying, that it was just my final dream as I was fading away in a snowdrift in the middle of the mountain.

And then suddenly the snow began to clear and I could see the ground below us. He set me down near the hotel and told me to go tell people what had happened. Then he just disappeared. But I am here. I was lost miles from there in a snowstorm. If an angel did not rescue me, who did? Did I walk - without my skis - for hours in a blizzard? Is that any less impossible? We can neither prove nor disprove the existence of angels, but it is easy to disprove that I am some kind of superwoman who can walk unharmed through a blizzard that could kill skilled mountaineers.

"Superwoman! So close and yet so far away!"

"Don't get too cocky now, baby. You saved a life, probably, and I am proud of you. But you have to be careful. Even more careful than this."

It would be wrong to say that spring did not begin until the middle of May. It had begun in a way already in the last part of March, when on sunny days the snow would start to melt around stones and tree trunks. But then it would snow again, or a strong wind would bring powder snow down from the mountains and fill the holes. During the end of April and the beginning of May, the sun grew rapidly hotter, and the rings around stones and trees and any dark object would expand until you could sometimes see the ground. But it was still biting cold at night. It was not until the last half of May that

summer came, and it came on top of a winter that had not really given itself up to spring.

Suddenly rivers were overflowing with meltwater, ice broke and dammed up. The locals did not seem surprised at all, perhaps it was like this every spring? The meltwater stood a meter or more above some fields, and roads were closed. Water was running everywhere. Tormod couldn't do anything about the weather, but he decided he could do something about the temporary dams of ice sheets in the river. Making himself invisible, he flew out and tried to break it up. Incredibly, his telekinesis had grown to a level where he could lift half a ton now. It did not grow as fast as his flight speed, but it was still pretty dramatic. Channeling that kind of energy into a single point was a pretty effective way to break the ice, literally. The hard part was finding the ice sheets that were the first to get stuck and kept all the others piled up. His X-ray vision had not increased in a long time. Perhaps he needed to practice it more?

There was a certain satisfaction to seeing the ice dam collapse and the water drain from roads and fields. He followed the river downward for a while, clearing any dams he could find. The flood of meltwater from the valleys was enough to keep the rivers overflowing their beds for the next few weeks.

The "russ" celebration ended and the high school seniors desperately tried to catch up before the finals. The teachers had tried to tell them since March at least that The End Was Nigh, but it took until now for them to repent. In that way at least school imitates life.

Perhaps practice makes perfect, or perhaps it was just dumb luck, but Tormod did notice that his X-ray vision started growing again, although slowly. It was a bit over a meter now. But it was not really something he used a lot. He was after all not a surgeon, but a high school student. And, at this time of the year, an assistant farmer.

With the fields bare of snow finally, there was not an hour to waste, and Tormod helped Silje as best he could. He already had the best grades anyone had ever had in this school. If he wanted to stay out of the national news, he better make a couple mistakes or he would get a perfect score in everything. That might attract unnecessary attention. Being among the 100 best in the country was ideal, being the best in the country - let alone the best in the country's history ever - would be troublesome. Now that was unlikely since there was a subjective element to grades set by teachers, but you could not be 100% sure. So instead he was planting cauliflower and potatoes and spreading manure on the fields.

"You are going away, aren't you?" said Silje.

"After summer, yeah. I've applied to the police academy, but perhaps the military claims me first. Failing that, I will be studying information technology on the south coast."

"It seems like such a waste, studying when you are as strong as you are."

He laughed. "That is such a refreshing counterpoint. Do you know 99 out of 100 people would say: It seems such a waste, working on a farm when you are as smart as you are."

"But almost no one is strong these days. They sit in front of computers and TV screens all day."

"There is the whole football club."

"Well, they are idiots. And even then, they are not as strong as you. You always hold back so as to not make me ashamed of how weak I am. I can see it, you know. I can see that you are only pretending to make an effort. I have no idea how strong you really are. I have no idea how fast you really are. I have no idea how smart you really are. You are always hiding some part of yourself."

"If I wasn't hiding some parts of myself I would get arrested" he said with a straight face.

"I wish you would show it to me and no one else."

"I think you just missed my joke."

"No, I know that had a double meaning. So had my answer."

"Silje, I am sorry. I have tried that before. That ended badly. People got hurt. You are right, I need to always hold back."

"Wow, that bad? You are like Clark Kent or something?"

"Not quite the boy of steel, but I tend to be number one if I don't hold back. That upsets a lot of people."

"But when you say people got hurt, do you mean girls you, uh, were close with?"

"Not even as close as you think. They just got to know me too well."

"Perhaps I am different."

"They were all different, Silje. I don't want to see you afraid of me."

"I could never be afraid of you, Tormod."

"You almost make me believe you, but you know nothing about me."

"Try me."

They were in the barn. He took a few steps back.

"Reality, REND!" He began to glow brightly all over.

"Synapse, BREAK!" He lifted into the air, halfway between the floor and the high ceiling.

"BANISHMENT, THIS WORLD!" Streamers of light like bands of illuminated fog or pale smoke swirled around him. Objects from the floor, ranging from hay to heavy sacks of grain, flew into the air and started floating around him counterclockwise as well. Straws of hay caught fire and burned to ash, suspended in the air. *'Are you still not afraid?'*

"Who ... what are you?"

'A semi-demigod, according to my mother. Although my grandma calls me a demonspawn.'

"This cannot be real!"

'I shall make it unreal. Do you now know fear?'

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

He pushed at time itself. Reality shivered, strained, then slipped.

"I wish you would show it to me and no one else." They were back to that.

"Don't think I am not tempted. But sometimes it is better to not know what you are missing. Come on, let's get back to work."

The final exams were just a blip. They felt like slightly different school days. 13 years of compulsory education, and this was it: A couple days of answering questions that weren't all that hard. Most of his grades were already decided by his ordinary teachers anyway. His online courses were more interesting and more challenging than this. But then, he was an extremely lucky young man, and he knew it. After all, it had not always been that way.

And then, one day, school was out. That was it. Childhood's end.

Tormod had been the weakest, now he was the strongest. He had been hiding in fear, now he was hiding so as to not scare others. Was there ever a time when he had been himself, except when alone or with his mother? And Rachel, perhaps. He had not heard from her in a while, as words really were not very useful to her. And now the local Lois Lane had a crush on Clark Kent and was scared of Superman. It did not seem that he was going to live happily ever after, not quite yet.

But he was still alive, and still growing. Maybe he really could guide this world through the coming storm, whatever that was. But that was still a long way off. For now, he had a long warm summer ahead of him, working on the farm with a funny girl. Then, the next chapter in his life would begin for real. He could do this. Hanging invisible in the air high above the valley, he saw the dusty old roads snaking their way from farm to farm, the green fields getting ready for harvest, and the river running through it all. You can never step into the same river twice, they say: The water in the river has changed, and so have you. But step in he would, even so.

They might not see him, but he would see them. There, tiny as an ant, was a sun-tanned high school girl jumping off the tractor outside his home. The warm summer air made his clothes flap as he swooped down. He could see the smile on her face now and feel her eager anticipation as she approached their front door. Yes, the river of time would tear them apart, like it had so often before. But for now, being a young semi-demigod was not such a bad deal. Not a bad deal at all.