

Preston

“Skol!” Sitting on a submerged stone stool, up to my neck in hot water, I hoisted my plastic beer cup.

My best bud, Preston, raised his drink. “May the lava gods refrain from cooking our asses.”

Steam rose from the lagoon’s surface into the freezing air. We leaned against a rock wall two stories above a parking lot. Bubbling mud ponds edged in yellow and blue sludge, burped white smoke into a lunar landscape.

“Iceland is surreal.” Preston pointed down at a blanket of treetops poking through low cloud cover. It was like an out-of-body experience.

Soft breezes lulled me into a trance until the reverse warning bleeps of a white ‘Icelandic Viking Tours’ bus jolted me back to reality. Two dozen bundled-up seniors trudged from the bus towards the Forest Lagoon’s entrance.

A few feet away from us, several girls in their twenties giggled and pointed at the bus, chattering unintelligible comments. One glanced in my direction through the steam and smiled. A breeze momentarily cleared the air. She was a head shorter than me, with a pixie’s turned-up nose and light brown hair pulled into a tight bun. A crescent moon and star tattoo distracted from the milky complexion of her long, graceful neck.

Preston stood in the waist-high water, exposing his etched wrestler’s abs that tapered into his swim trunks. “Check out those tats and piercings. Probably not sorority chicks.”

I shrugged. “I came to this God-forsaken place for adventure. Let’s go say hello.”

Trying to add an inch or two to my height, I waded over on my toes. Most of the Viking descendants towered over me. The girls stood as we approached, showing off Rivera-worthy bikinis. Two of the five bathing beauties looked down on my six-foot frame. Their size, long braided blonde hair, and sharp cheekbones screamed Brunnhilde.

I sauntered over to the one who gave me the glad eye. “Speak English?” Everyone here did, but it was the best ice-breaker I could come up with. I made a mental note to Google “Icelandic ice-breakers” later.

She extended her hand in a graceful sweep. “It’s the universal language. I even speak some American. I’m Andrea. You with a tour?” Her Icelandic accent was delightful.

My face flushed. I gently clasped her hand between my two. “I’m Chad.” The water between us seemed to rise a few degrees without yellowing. “No, just winging it for a month on a European

getaway to celebrate college graduation. This is my first stop.”

Andrea raised her eyebrows. “It must be nice.”

It was. We came from old Philadelphia money, not just the “haves” but the “have mores.” I was the son of two doctors. Preston had a stockbroker dad and a charity luncheon mom. Details I don’t need to share. “Recommend any good dive bars in town?”

She jabbered something, probably in Icelandic, making the two Viking girls who flanked Preston laugh. He was uncharacteristically speechless, eyes wide and mouth agape.

“Dirty Ivan’s is where everyone goes. The D.J. starts at eight.” Andrea stared at the line of seniors easing into the pool. Half of them scanned the water as if searching for alligators. She sighed. “Here come the grandparents. Time to go. Maybe I’ll see you there tonight.” Her leg brushed provocatively against mine when she turned to her friends.

The Viking twins winked at each other as they left. Preston’s grin was so wide, my face hurt. Minutes later, we headed toward the pool’s exit ramp, too. My foot touched something soft. I peered down at the outline of one of the grandmas. “Shit.” I went under and pulled her out of the four-foot-deep water.

Preston, a certified lifeguard, helped me carry her to the wooden deck. The group of gathering grandparents disbanded when two staff members took over. Preston led me into the locker room. As usual, my best buddy shunned praise. We dressed in silence and snuck out of the lobby unnoticed.

An enormous full moon escorted us on our ten-minute drive home, casting a silvery glow across the sky. Preston’s eyes followed it from the passenger window.

I touched his shoulder. “You did it again, buddy. This should make the local news.”

Ignoring me, he pointed above. “They call that a beaver moon.” His grin reappeared. “That’s a good omen.”

Too modest. “Really. You should take credit when it’s due.” I thought back to when he tried to break up a fraternity party brawl. It cost him a broken arm. When there was trouble, he always ran towards it. I admired that. A lot.

On our left, a dense forest lined the road. To our right, white smoke rose from cracks and holes in black lava fields that stretched a few miles to snow-covered, flat-topped mountains. Darkness set in at the end of a seven-hour day.

Mystic wisps of red, green, and violet interlaced in the sky, dancing around each other and

fading in and out, adding to the otherworldly atmosphere.

I pulled off the road, and we sat, heads out the window, exchanging “wows” until the light show dissolved.

Another good omen. I crossed my fingers, hoping for a special Dirty Ivan’s experience.

After a tasty dinner of lamb hot dogs, which I checked for wool, we walked the two blocks to the other side of town. Dire Straits’ “Money for Nothing” ricocheted off low-rise office buildings and sleeping storefronts.

Preston shook his head. “Guess you can only listen to so much Björk.”

No bouncers attended Dirty Ivan’s entrance. Inside, the crowd’s energy approached mayhem.

Many of the customers were bouncer-sized. Some wore Santa hats even though it was two months early.

While we waited at the bar, Preston mumbled, “Now that’s a Viking.”

A few yards away stood a bear of a man with a full beard, pissed-off eyes, and a horned silver helmet. His menacing biceps barely fit through the holes of his sleeveless denim jacket. A half dozen dudes, dressed more normally, gathered around him, drinking beer from tall boot-shaped mugs that must have held a half-gallon. The big guy guzzled his suds from a foot-high glass skull, spilling half of it over his beard.

I yelled above the din, “That must be where the Viking toast, ‘Skol,’ came from.” The brute glared at me and snarled.

An elbow nudged my side. It was Andrea from the lagoon. “Glad you came. You’re just in time for our party in the back.”

She led the way through heavy pine doors to a smaller room. In the center, a card table of shot glasses filled with a yellowish liquid laced the air with the essence of fusel oil. Mr. Viking and friends swaggered into the room. He grunted and handed out the drinks.

The Viking bellowed a ten-syllable word that could have been a toast, and everyone drank. I downed mine in one gulp. It tasted worse than it smelled. My lamb dogs wanted out. However, after my third shot, the yellow brew’s flavor grew on me, with its subtle hints of sheep and a strong finish of wet dog.

The floor rocked as I spied Preston on the other side of the room with his pigtailed friends from the lagoon. I whispered to myself, “My God, if anyone deserves a good time, it’s him.” I rubbed

my eyes when the three of them blurred together. Convinced that another shot would fix the problem, I threw back two to be sure.

High-pitched laughter rose from the filthy wooden floor. I crouched to investigate. A pair of elves, similar to those in the souvenir shops, leaped over my foot and disappeared into the crowd. Dozens more scurried around, bumping into shoes and each other. This was the land of mischievous elves, gnomes, and fairies: stuff Nordic Christmas tales were made of. Suspending my disbelief, I leaned into the magic. Excited to share my discovery, I waved Preston and his entourage over.

He dangled an arm over each of the Viking girls' shoulders, and they towed him through the crowd. As they arrived, the striking vixens morphed into my two dead grandmothers, who withered to nothing, dropping Preston at my feet. A dark sadness filled my heart as everyone disappeared. I closed my eyes, remembering the Christmas when he'd met my grandparents. A brilliant white light strobed the room, flashing Preston's skeletal x-ray in sync with each glare. Scared shitless, my chest filled with an unexplainable warmth of happiness. The strobes condensed to a steady, single beam extending from my toes through the ceiling and into the night. A powerful suction transported me to the giant beaver moon in minutes. I gently landed on my back against a cold, hard surface. Tiny sharp edges bit through my clothes and into my skin. A strong dusty wind stung my face, and my throat constricted. Sickening sweet, rotten fumes of pure evil filled my nostrils.

I awoke to the two Amazon girls standing over me, one whispering to the other, "It's wearing off." They ran away, splashing bare feet through puddles. The noise rippled through my head. My sinuses burned from what smelled like sulfur fumes.

Wooden torches flickered, reflecting off smooth, wet cave walls. My eyes adjusted. Preston and I were naked from the waist up. One-inch ropes lashed through eyelets, strapped us to the cold stone floor.

He coughed loudly and wheezed. "Where the hell are we?"

Soft chants echoed from the back of the cave. The voices, mostly male, sang three long Icelandic-sounding lines, followed by a growl, in a repeating sequence. A sheep's bleating and the scuffling of hooves followed, sending a chill through my body.

I whispered, "And what's that?"

Preston stared straight ahead, face enraged. "Sounds like one of those pagan rituals with animal sacrifice." Red and yellow flames flared up the back wall as inhuman screams pierced my eardrums.

The chants continued, faster and louder. The leader's scratchy, low-pitched drone was like an African throat singer I'd once heard. The chants stopped when they reached us.

The horn-helmeted freak from Dirty Ivan's led the group. Now dressed in furs, he knelt at my side, spat on the ground, and grinned. "He groaned a few words in that agitating voice."

He drew back a fist the size of my head, and before I could react, a galaxy of pinpoint stars filled the room. I drew deep breaths to fight my nausea and heard a scream from the back of the cave. This time it was human. I forced my eyes open. Preston was gone.

Without warning, my vomit shot upward. I turned my head to the side to avoid choking.

Preston's screams echoed through the cave. His last gasp was barely audible. I thought he called my name.

I held my breath, straining to hear any indication of life, exhaling only when I had to. More chants, led by louder throat noises, ripped through my soul. My best friend was gone. A paralyzing bolt of pain shot down my spine, terrifying, yet so familiar.

I'm next. My eyelids squeezed tight. Tiny dots danced, then swirled, then went dark.

A small hand covered my mouth. Andrea put a finger to her lips. "Shhh." She cut my bindings. "They're all sleeping below."

Soft torchlights bathed the empty cave. She quietly led me into the night.

The ground shifted beneath me, throwing off my balance. I peered down to steady myself.

Preston's face smiled up at me. A blast of cold air chilled my heart. Always the hero.

Outside of the cave, razor edges of porous lava bit into my bare feet. Andrea crept to the pile of boots at the cave's entrance and brought me a pair. "You'll be walking on bloody bones without these." She wrapped a large fur pelt around my bare torso. I wondered if I could trust her, but for now I had no choice.

I put on the shoes and grabbed my phone from my pants pocket.

She held up a hand. "Who are you calling?"

"The police?"

She laughed. "All three of them are back there in the cave. Thor's disciples."

Andrea took my hand, hustled me across an empty field, over a deserted two-lane road, and into

a forest. Frosted pine needles crunched under our soles, but the ground was snow-free. My feet rubbed against raw leather, and I wished for a thick pair of socks.

She picked up her pace. "Everyone was up late with Thor's ceremonies. When they wake to us missing, they'll come running."

"Thor?"

She frowned. "Real name is Sven."

"What's wrong with that bastard?"

She released my hand and climbed over a fallen tree. "Used to be a fun guy, a practical joker.

He'd stage pagan rituals to scare people he didn't like. Then he moved on to tourists."

"And?"

"Some Germans sold him a drug. I think they called it DMT, or maybe it was DMF. Anyhow, he calls it D."

"I've heard of DMT. It's called the 'Business Man's LSD' because it only lasts about fifteen minutes." My heavy boots snagged on the tree trunk, and I face-planted on a bed of pine needles. Numb from the cold, it barely hurt when I picked them out.

Andrea helped me up. "It's a fast high if you sniff or inject the stuff. Orally, it can last hours and can flashback for days. Very psychedelic."

It was in my drink. "That explains the elves at your party."

"No gnomes or fairies?"

"No, but I did see dead grandmothers."

"Thor says the drug takes him to the line between life and death, and it helps with his sacrifices."

Her words slurred in a gust of wind. "Until last night, he just killed animals."

The full impact of losing Preston crushed me again. That fraternity party flashed through my mind. Even in elementary school, Preston would stand up for the dweeb being teased. It was usually me. I wiped a tear from my eye.

Andrea squeezed my hand. "When Thor started those drugs, I wanted to quit his group. But he's vengeful. When he decided to go after you last night, I didn't want to get involved. I went home but couldn't sleep." She grabbed my arm and broke into a jog. "Gotta keep moving."

My mind raced. I needed to call my parents. I huffed, "My father's a powerful man who knows other, even more powerful men. He'll help us out." I pulled out my phone. "Zero bars."

"I have a good hiding place where your phone should work." She glanced at me and bit her lip.

“You’re limping. We can safely rest in a few minutes.”

We stopped at a large pile of branches, tangled in a rat’s nest of straw and dead leaves. I helped Andrea lift a branch, revealing the false panel covering a four-foot-wide hole. She climbed in and pulled a flashlight and a plastic bag of batteries from a recess in the wall. “This lava tube formed around fifty years ago. It leads to the edge of my village. My friends and I discovered it when we were teenagers.”

I sat on the floor, scanning the smooth black walls that took a sharp turn. I carefully untied the boots and slipped them off, trying to avoid touching several spots caked in dry blood.

Andrea removed her fur vest, then a thick sweatshirt, and finally a worn thermal undershirt. “This thing’s trash anyway.” She pulled at a small hole in the undershirt and soon had two pieces. “A tight wrap around each foot should help.”

I glanced at her bra.

“Never saw a bra before?”

“Not with orange flames on the cups.”

“One of Thor’s girls painted them for his rituals. We all had to wear them.”

“You were one of his girls?” My suspicions of her returned.

“Not like that. I just went along for the parties.” She wiped her eyes with her sweatshirt.

We climbed the tube for another half hour. It twisted and turned, all the while sloping upwards. Some parts narrowed to less than three feet. Andrea offered her belt loop as a grip and led me through. I was glad I wasn’t claustrophobic.

The other end of the tunnel was closed off by another hidden panel. She pushed it open a crack and peeked around. “No sign of them. Follow me.”

My phone read five a.m. Sunrise wasn’t for another four hours. She navigated without the flashlight, hugging burnt ruins she seemed to know well. I followed her along a meandering, five-foot-wide lava trail ending at an unpainted but intact barn.

I was spooked by the door squeaking on rusty hinges as we forced it open and closed it behind us. Even brighter than last night, the beaver moon leaked through cracks in the boarded windows.

She opened a trap door in the floor, shining the flashlight down a set of broken wooden steps.

“Follow my exact path and watch your head.”

The basement had a dirt floor but was surprisingly roomy. She lit two candles that sat on an old

swayback card table with her plastic lighter. A half-dozen metal crates scattered around the room served as seating. "This was where my friends and I played after school." She smiled and wiped a thick layer of dust from the table. "No one's been here in years."

I sat on a crate and pictured our special childhood place, a treehouse in Preston's backyard. With a deep sigh, I checked my phone for a signal. Two bars. I wasn't ready to call. Had to get my story straight.

I asked, "What would you do if Thor and his friends were arrested?"

Her lips curled down. "I'm one of his friends."

"You saved my life. You'd have the best lawyers. My parents would see to it."

Andrea pulled a crate next to me. "Then what? Thor and his police friends would make my life miserable."

I put my arm around her. "As you said, it's a small town. What if you came back home with me? No strings attached. I could set you up in an apartment and help you find a good job."

She stood and paced around the basement. "First, let's worry about Thor."

Voices broke the hopeful silence hanging in the air. They grew closer and louder by the minute.

Andrea cocked her head toward the heavy ceiling. "Shit. It's Thor and his guys."

She was right. They were fast. They must have tracked us from the cave and, after our trail went cold, guessed we'd come here. All my plans turned to ashes.

We snuffed out the candles and quietly waited. The barn door creaked, and dust fell on our heads as the group tromped around the barn. I held my breath, praying that Andrea's secret clubhouse was still a secret.

Thor screamed something that needed no translation, and the stomping and voices trailed away from the barn.

The basement ceiling shook again. Then the whole structure. Andrea slammed her hand on the table. "The tremors always come first. This volcano's connected to a huge network of shallow underground lava pools, so anything can happen."

We carefully raised the floor panel and crept to the edge of the barn. Thor pointed at the volcano, a quarter mile away. A wall of fire lit the night sky as multi-pronged streams of lava flowed toward the village. Between fire bursts, clouds of dark grey ash billowed from the flat-topped mountain, quickly drifting over the ghost town.

Thor's group sprinted away from the eruption.

Andrea pushed me toward the lava tube. “Let’s go.”

My sore feet moved as if they belonged to a sprinter. We jumped into the tube just as a blast of molten lava shot up from the ground behind us. Fifty yards into the tube, a heat wave passed over us. The back of my neck stung, and a strange burning smell filled the air. The ends of Andrea’s straight hair shrunk into tight smoking balls. The hot blast abated when the tube swerved.

Andrea felt the sidewalls. “The lava must have crossed over us. We should be safe from here on.”

Two hours later, we stumbled into town, ashes dropping from our clothes. I led Andrea to my hotel. “Let’s get a shower and some sleep.”

The hotel receptionist gasped but recognized me. “What happened to you?”

“It’s a long story.” I guided Andrea to the elevator. Once in my room, we skipped the showers, hung the “do not disturb” sign, and collapsed on the bed.

We awoke ten hours later, showered separately, had memorable “end-of-the-world” sex, and put a big dent in the hotel’s breakfast buffet. My unspoken thoughts churned, hoping to become a plan once I had some nourishment.

Three days later...

My parents sat in the one-room Akureyri police station with their lawyer, listening intently to our story. I avoided mentioning Preston. “So, Andrea saved my life twice: once in the cave and again from the Volcano.”

The lawyer turned the page of his notepad. “And what happened to Thor and his gang?”

The police chief looked away and gulped. “They chose the wrong direction to run. A search team found them embedded in lava.”

My dad touched Andrea’s shoulder. “Lucky for your secret exit.” Then hugged his wife. “God took care of those assholes.”

There was not much left for the lawyer to do but expedite Andrea’s passport.

Six months later...

Back in Villanova, Pennsylvania, on my usual Saturday visit, we sat by Preston’s grave. The headstone read “A TRUE HERO. “ I kissed Andrea’s cheek. “I told him you were coming.” She took my hand. “Please tell me what happened?”

My throat dried, and my eyes moistened. “There was a campus shooting. As Preston led our group for cover, he stared back at my chest... at the laser dot. He jumped in front of me and pushed me to the ground.”

I ran my finger over his headstone. “Goddamned hero to the end.”

I shook my head. “We’d been planning our Iceland trip for a year. He was with me in spirit.” Andrea placed a bouquet of flowers on the grave. She whispered, “Don’t worry, I’m taking good care of your buddy. You have no idea how much he misses you.” She turned to the headstone and patted her belly. “His name will be Preston.”