Becoming friends again isn't easy. Character development takes ages. Sometimes you meet back up when you're in your adulthood and the timing just becomes right again. This is one of those times.

Notes

I don't own Hey Arnold, I do own a laptop.

This fic invites you to imagine if Helga never confessed during TJM or during Hey Arnold! The Movie.

I have never written Hey Arnold before, but I figured this would be a good starting point.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

So class was absolute fun today.

At least, to the minds of the never-settling kids that occupied P.S. 118, it was.

To the teacher currently taking lead in English, it might have been a little more daunting and draining, but hey, when you’re Mr Arnold Shortman, class of the 4th Grade in P.S. 118, it worked.

“Alright class, we’re continuing our presentation on ”Female Authors”, and today,” he scanned the register to find the last child who had not presented their work yet.”It seems to be Jayden’s turn. Jayden?”

He looked up to see the aforementioned student stand up, a small, tan, floppy-haired child who was clutching his usb drive rather tightly. He gave the kid an encouraging smile and nod as he made his way down the aisle to the front of the class, where he loaded up his USB into the desktop the class was equipped with. The kid fumbled a little with the desktop but managed to load up Powerpoint just fine and opened his saved slides. Arnold, who was shuffling his papers, was looking for a blank side of paper to start jotting down his notes on the kid’s presentation. So concentrated he was that he did not look up until the last possible moment, which was when Jayden started speaking.

“My project is on the writer Helga G. Pataki-“

Now that did get Arnold’s attention, whose head shot up so quickly, you could almost hear the crick in his neck.

That name, he hadn’t heard for quite a while.

“Helga Pataki is the writer behind the works of, Our Gang series of books, and currently is the writer of the graphic novel, Umbrella Girl, which is about a girl who discovers she has superpowers when she wields her magical umbrella-“ said Jayden, at first reading off the paper but then slowly getting more enthusiastic about his presentation.

Still stunned about his childhood coming back to push him off his tracks just like a certain blonde girl frequently did, Arnold had to take a few more seconds to absorb what Jayden had said. Was Helga a writer? For children’s books? Why hadn’t he heard of this before?

“Her books currently are at the top ten of the New York’s bestselling list, beaten only by the novel The Hate U Give-“

Not only was she a children’s author, but also a New York’s best-seller? Damn, the girl was always surprising him.

The rest of the presentation went by in a blur for Arnold, but he did manage to absorb some new information about Helga he hadn’t known for a while. Helga was also an activist, who went hard for intersectional feminism, LGBTQ rights, and the protection of minors. She had been an organizing member of a few marches in her current hometown of Michigan, and had been known for her short story and poetry collections before she went into YA and graphic novels. Helga, as a recent photo of her at a convention that Jayden included in his slides, was now tall, well-built, and had blonde hair
that was dyed pink at the lower half, what the kids were calling, “Ombre” (Arnold wasn’t that into hairstyles), as well as an eyebrow piercing. (Her unibrow of childhood’s past had been tamed into two separate but well-shaped arches). She was smirking in the picture, as a rather shy but smiling Jayden stood next to her, grasping a copy of Umbrella Girl.

“The lessons I have learnt from Helga G. Pataki are numerous,” Jayden said, now nearing the end of his presentation. “Number one: It’s always important to treat the people you like with as much respect as possible, no matter how old or what gender they are. Number two: Fight for the ones who need it, especially if you can. And lastly, number three: No matter how silly your passions may seem, ignoring them is even worse. She helped me accept the fact that it’s okay to love myself, no matter my mistakes. And that is why I did this project on Helga Pataki.” He finished the presentation to the applause of the students in the class, and a blushing Jayden bowed his head as he shuffled back to his desk.

Arnold clapped as well, but his brow was knitted in concentration as he realised that instead of judging Jayden on his presentation, he had taken down every bit of information he had just learnt about Helga. Whoops, he would have to rewrite that. He cleared his throat. “Thank you, Jayden, for that presentation. Now next on the presentation list …”

Later, Arnold called Jayden to his desk when the class was dismissed.

“Hi Mr Shortman, is there anything wrong?” Jayden mumbled shyly as he approached the table. Arnold smiled.

“You’re not in trouble, Jayden,” Arnold said in a reassuring tone. “I just wanted to tell you that I really enjoyed your presentation today, and it was interesting that you chose someone who was a writer for graphic novels”

Jayden looked stricken as he blurted out “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to, all you said that it could be a female writer-”

Before Jayden could go on another panic fuelled spiel, Arnold made a small gesture, which Jayden had managed to register, and he slowed down, taking a deep breath and releasing it a few times. This had happened before, Jayden tended to apologise for a lot more than was needed and was at his worst when he thought he was in trouble or when he was worried about something, and Arnold had learnt a few times managing the small boy in the few years he had been teaching him.

“I just wanted to say. “Arnold continued when he knew the boy had managed to calm down a bit. “I knew Helga when she was young. She used to go to PS. 118 with me.”

“Woah, really?”

“Really.”

Jayden looked like he was exploding with questions, but all he could manage was, “How was she like as a kid?”

“Truthfully?” Arnold said, thinking back to his own PS118 days. It was hard to explain a force of nature that was Helga G Pataki, and it would be harder still to figure out what to say to a student who so clearly idolised Helga and her stories. He settled for the truth.
“Helga was… spirited,” he told the kid. “She was passionate, impatient, never could take fools lightly-“

“What does that mean?” Jayden asked, confused.

“She didn’t like it when people didn’t use their common sense.” Arnold rephrased, with a rueful shake of the head. “She loved baseball and was always into the games we used to play. She would yell at me when I would miss the ball, and she was competitive.”

Jayden smiled, “There’s a character in her books that does that. Her name is Emma. She yells a lot too.”

“Really?” Arnold said, intrigued. “That’s in her-“

“Our Gang Series!” Jayden said enthusiastically. “Oh it’s amazing, Mr Shortman, they have these two guys called Josh and Eric, and they’re the main characters but they always hang out with a bunch of friends like-“

Arnold let Jayden prattle on for a bit while he described the gang, but then as he glanced towards the clock, he realized that Jayden had already spent 10 minutes of his recess time, and he wouldn’t be able to get another break until school was released for the day. He gently reminded the small child of the time, and ushered him out the door, promising that yes, he would have a look at the books Helga G Pataki wrote, and to tell him if he liked them.

Once the child was out of earshot, Arnold grabbed his phone that was in his pocket.

He had quite a bit of research to do, research that he doubted the school computers would be able to handle the speed of questions he currently had.

He was lucky. Typing the words Helga G Pataki in the Google search bar gave him all the information he needed and filled in the gaps he had from his own memories after Helga and her family had moved out of Hillwood after the 6th Grade.

According to her Wikipedia page, Helga G. Pataki had moved to Michigan, in a busier town named Miltown. While there, she had become a serious writer, and from an article he found of a high-school newsletter, served as editor. She then majored in Theatre Studies at the University of Michigan and graduated Summa Cum Laude. She performed some slam poetry and did some writing for magazines before signing her first book deal.

However, the page itself didn’t serve as a complete guide. The rest of the information came from, surprisingly, forums and Youtube videos.

The first he saw was a video of Helga speaking at a convention, in a panel discussion about writing children realistically. Helga was easily recognisable, her hair was straight, ash-blond from the golden locks Arnold remembered, and in a braid for the occasion. She was also the youngest and only white woman on the panel, with the others consisting of an Asian woman and two other white men. It was a rather lengthy panel, one which Arnold was ashamed to say he had watched the whole 1 hr talk just to hear Helga Pataki speak for at most 15 minutes, but then he didn’t regret it, especially when someone got up to ask Helga a question regarding her latest instalment of The Gang.
“I read the latest Our Gang book,” said a tall, rather balding man. (Do adult men even read YA anymore? Arnold wondered.) “and I’m curious about your choice to make Emma do all the things she did in order to push everyone away. Were you worried about the possibility that you were alienating the children who revere her as a female role model?”

Helga had been frowning a little when the man started asking the question, but in a measured tone, she bent over to the microphone in front of her, and replied, “Well, that’s the thing about characters. They’re not meant to be all good or all bad, and they’re not meant to be total life lessons. I write characters that are true to me, and what is true to me is that a character that has been as emotionally abused as Emma needs time to figure herself in her own skin, and she will possibly alienate people who wish to be friends with her in order to do so. That’s what I have found to be most realistic, and before writing this book, I consulted with a few child psychologists, one which happens to be my friend, on how mean I can make her without bordering too much on domination and mis-aimed aggression. What I was worried about was making Emma not seem like just an angry child. She does have character development, and with the timeline, I want to work with, she will be able to become well-adjusted. It can’t be resolved in a paragraph or even a book.”

The man, undeterred, continued. “But then what makes you think people can relate to her if she wasn’t a good example-”

Now there was a flash of irritation, and the beginnings of the patented Helga G Pataki scowl. “What makes you think a good character has to be polite and kind all the time? Why do you believe good female characters have to be nice or they will alienate others?” Helga had cut in, gripping the mike with a little more anger than necessary, but still polite. Granted, it did sound a little more heated than before, but it was still a far cry from the past when she would rant about the perils of the world. “The important part is that kids find characters to relate to, and learn lessons on how to live life and develop. Not all children start out all good. Criminy, I’m a little insulted you would be commenting on Emma’s character development being the only bad thing when you haven’t said a word about Jameel’s machismo and rather off-putting behaviour when dealing with crushes.”

Having never seen Helga ever speak that long on a special subject that clearly did mean something to her, Arnold was fascinated. He stopped the clip and went to look at the right-sidebar again, looking for more Helga related videos.

The second one was a surprise. Entitled, “My Interview With Helga Pataki.”, there was Helga, sitting in what seemed to be someone’s home, and a beautiful, glittering, heavily made-up woman was next to her, drawling in what seemed to be a Southern Accent.

“So, Helga.” said the woman who seemed to be wearing some sort of shiny highlighter all over her cheeks. “Tell us how we met.”

Helga, who looked nearly washed out in comparison to the colours the woman was wearing, glanced back, smirking, “Well, you and I used to run in the same gang back when we were kids, but then I moved to a whole new state, and I’ll be honest, I didn’t think much of you when I left-”

“Oh honey, don’t be silly. Neither did I!” And the two cackled like old friends.

“So anyway, we only re-forged connections when we were in college-” said Helga, teasingly. “And I was walking out of a bar, after that Tequila shot thingy-”

“For the people at home, our university used to have The Two Tequila Shot Towers, where you had to drink every shot in the serving area before you took the absolute top drink which was set on fire and called the Eye of Sauron or something-”
“And I had won a challenge!” cheered Helga,” So I went out to get a breath of fresh air and crow about my success to my best friend, Mr Dumpster.”

“She went to puke.” the woman continued drily.

“When suddenly-” Helga continued, resolutely ignoring what her friend was saying. “I heard a crash, and wouldn’t you know it, there was a ginger kid getting beat up by two football players. I was feeling very indignant, because how dare they, I was trying to be intimate with Mr Dumpster, so I gave them a piece of my mind to get them to stop being so noisy.”

“The ginger kid was me.” Said the woman, airily. ‘Yes, everything under this wig is ginger, like that ghastly singer they call Ned Sherane-’

“Ed Sheeran, criminy, get your pop culture facts right.-”

“Can you stand that man? He looks like he would be hairy all over-”

“Ginger bum, Jinxy.” Helga drawled. “Do you want that twerking up against you?”

The other woman grimaced, but side-eyed the other blonde girl.

“Helga basically took a look at the entire situation, yelled, ‘SHUT UP, BUCKOS! I’M TRYING TO WORSHIP MY NEW SHRINE, CAUSE I AM TRASH AND WORTH IT! Now get out or I will be making a new Avengers movie starring my fist and a cameo from Betsy Ross!’ and then started punching everyone.”

Helga had rolled her eyes and said, “Geez, was I that articulate when I was drunk as hell?”

“Girl, it was epic. When I looked up, there she was! My glamazonian Hell-Girl, Helga, who then punched me in the boob, told me to prepare to die, asshole, and then puked all over my white shirt.”

“You were the one who said that you were okay!”

“Honey, I say that all the time, but that white shirt had to be burnt. Not even Linda Blair would wear it.”

Helga straight up giggled while slapping the woman on the shoulder. Arnold never thought a sound like that would ever come out of Helga Pataki, but he had now seen video that proved it.

“So, she and I have been friends ever since.” the woman continued. “She’s the one who helped me get me where I am, and even helped me pick out my drag name, and helped shaped me to be the sensuous woman I am today, Jinkx Fortuna!”

“She-devil more like.” Helga had muttered.

“Excuse you, Hell-Girl-”

”I’m not the one who is ginger and has no soul!” she retorted back.

”It’s not my fault Eugene was cursed with the red hair of a troll doll and not the blonde hair of my real-self Jinkx!”

Arnold had to stop the clip after that, having just managed to get what seemed to be a whole load of exposition landing straight on his football-shaped head. Helga and Eugene had been in college together? Helga defended Eugene in a fight? Eugene was now a highlighter-obsessed drag performer
named Jinkx Fortuna?

Although, now that he had time to think about it, the name did suit the bad-luck stricken boy of his youth. Helga had evidently chosen well.

Helga had also somehow managed to carve a whole friendship with someone else in the childhood gang other than him. That did make him feel a little wistful and a little jealous.

The third bit of info he managed to find out about Helga were in the forums, after an article about her hitting the NY top 10 list was published. The puff piece itself wasn’t the bit that interested him. It was the comments below.

There were a few squees about loving her work, and a few that talked about her poetry collection. Arnold did try to find a copy of her older works but was unable to, so he just ordered a copy of poems that someone had put up on eBay. He tried to scan the comments and that’s when he saw it.

@helgagataki didn’t she find her mom dead on the floor or something? That’s what I recall when I was reading Smoothie Breaks, and that she dedicated the entire book to her mom or something.

What?

He continued reading the comment thread, a little more dazed. Apparently, Miriam Pataki had passed on, at about the age of 48. They found a batch of crushed pills that were only partially dissolved in the smoothie glass she was holding when she collapsed. Helga had been the one to find her and call 911, to no avail. The poetry book Purple Berries and Other Things You’ll Find at The Bottom of the Glass was a collection of poems about her mom, and the poem Smoothie Breaks was about the moment Helga found her mom lying dead on the living room floor, still clutching the spilt, half-finished glass. No foul play was ever found.

He looked back at the picture of Helga that accompanied the article, a picture that looked like it was pulled directly from the About the Author segment. Somehow, he felt that the photograph didn’t suit the smirking, blonde woman who he had seen in the YouTube videos. That woman was passion, fire-incarnate, and this picture made her seem as though she was stuffed in a brown suit jacket and watered down in an attempt to be taken seriously.

His phone buzzed with an incoming message, causing Arnold to look up from his laptop.

Gerald: Let me up I have groceries.

Oh right, it was Gerald’s turn to do the grocery shopping today, which probably meant he managed to get two of everything they needed on the list, so he needed help with getting the door opened. Arnold got up from his bed, padded quietly across the marble floor to the front door, and opened it, revealing a man concealed behind two huge paper bags of groceries as well as a canvas bag.

“About time, Arnold!!” gasped Gerald Johanssen. “I had to climb 4 flights of stairs cause the elevator is broken again-”

He leaned against the door to catch his breath, and Arnold grabbed the paper bags before Gerald could drop them on the floor. The building they were currently renting out of was indeed a little older, but considering how beautiful the apartment was and how much of a steal they were getting it at, they were hardly complaining. Besides, it was a bus ride away straight to the Sunset Arms, and Arnold did want to find a place close by to his family.

“You will never guess whose name came up in class today.” Arnold began conversationally as he
helped Gerald put away the monster bag of chips he seemed to have gotten.

“Hedy LaMarr?” Gerald hazarded a guess as he opened the fridge to put in the 2 cartons of milk he seemed to have gotten.

“Nope. Helga Pataki.”

Gerald closed the door a little to see if Arnold was joking. He evidently found his answer. “Holy crap.”

“I know.”

Gerald grabbed the vegetables out of the bag and loaded up the vegetable crisper. “How’s the Blonde Menace doing? And why were you discussing her in class?”

Arnold began to explain what had happened: the assignment to present on a female author they liked, Jayden’s Powerpoint slides, the fact that Helga was a YA author who did Umbrella Girl-

“Wait, Umbrella Girl?” Gerald stopped packing the vegetables away to look back at Arnold again. “Really?”

“You know it?”

“It’s the newest graphic novel series that EVERYONE in the office is talking about!” Gerald said, waving a hand as he started piling up apples and oranges in the crisper. “It’s become some sort of hit, everyone’s calling it the new Harry Potter. Rhonda has been cradling that book claiming that she’s now a feminist just because of that character. She’s considering doing some sort of video which is just 10 minutes of people reading it and reacting to the storyline and art.”

Arnold gave Gerald a look. “Exactly how is TalkBuzz earning money if you all are making videos at the whims of Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd?”

“Eh, she’s paying us, I don’t question it, I just pitch video ideas, and get them made.” Gerald waved his question off airily. He grabbed his phone out of his pocket, typed something in, and gave a low whistle at the results. “Damn, Helga got hot. ’He murmured, showing Arnold what he was looking at, which seemed to be a picture of Helga in all black, wearing doc martens and holding a protest sign. She did, indeed, looked, as Gerald did put it, “Hot.” “And a protest organiser eh? Well, Little Miss Pataki made it big. Never thought I would see the day.”

“I’m surprised you’re surprised,” said Arnold. “Don’t you keep updated on Facebook and Phoebe and all?”

It didn’t make sense how neither he nor Gerald knew about what Helga had been up to since sixth grade, especially since Gerald did date Helga’s best friend Phoebe for a good 4 years before breaking up the summer college rolled around. They were still friends via Facebook, though Phoebe was no longer in Hillwood, having moved to New York City to attend college, enter medical school, and become a neurosurgeon. Arnold did also have a Facebook account, but it seemed Helga didn’t.

“Pheebs’ busy all the time, man.” Gerald sighed. Despite the fact that they were friends, that fact was part of the reason why they broke up, and it was a sore spot for him. “Besides, even when we were dating, she and I spent loads of time together, but she would always dodge my questions if it ever went to Helga territory. She missed her loads, and it was cutting her up that she wasn’t in the same town as her anymore. I didn’t ask because it would hurt her more.”

That did sort of make sense. “Then why didn’t we find out via the internet or something?”
Gerald set aside the bananas. “Arnold, my man. It’s 2017. We’re a pair of 29-year old men with full working lives, limited free time, and we spend that free time either playing Overwatch, babysitting relatives or small children or at the pub getting a drink. When we’re on social media, we get a little more scared reading the news, and we are also trying to find love in this dangerous, lonely city. I liked Helga, but man, we have not heard from that girl since we were 12. It’s totally understandable.”

Arnold considered telling Gerald what he had learnt about Helga’s mom but decided to leave the subject for the time being. What he did next was get out his phone and said, “By the way, you will never guess what Eugene is doing now-”

Chapter End Notes

I missed writing fanfic. I should go back and complete stuff I tried to do awhile back.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Michigan has Phoebe visiting for a bit, and Helga has a convention coming up. Eugene has plans.

In Michigan, Helga Pataki rolled her eyes for what seemed to be the 100th time while talking on the phone to her poor agent.

“Yes, Fran, I did indeed get the edited manuscript in the email,” she grumbled, one hand scrolling through Twitter and liking a tweet while another was thrust into her jacket pocket. “No- wait what? Fran, you seriously have to stop babbling- ow! Ow! Don’t screech like that, fucking hell-“

Helga held the phone away from her ear as the nasal pitched tones of her editor could be heard even from the speakers of her iPhone. She was irritated but subtly impressed. No one had a voice like Fran Pine, and if you crossed her, she will let you know it.

Via screaming, but yeah.

“Fine fine, I will do the convention tour again! Let’s just keep it low, maybe 6 places for book signings, and ONE interview. Yes, ONE interview, Fran! An interview from ONE company, a press conference does not count as ONE interview, one on one interviews only!”

She listened again, and retorted, “That was not creative thinking, Frannie! That was an omission of the truth, which is a lie!” She rolled her eyes, and then with an exasperated but fond voice, she went,”Yeah yeah, I love you too Frannie P. Have a good day, I’ll see you.”

She pressed the End Call button and went back to the restaurant where her lunch date was sitting, patiently waiting for her to finish her conversation.

‘Sorry about that, Pheebs.” She apologised. “ My agent is making me do a convention tour again, and I was trying to get her to keep it low. I hate convention tours.”

Dr. Phoebe Heyerdahl, neurosurgeon and on the path to becoming Chief of Surgery at John Hopkins, nodded understandably from her seat. While she hated being in the spotlight, Phoebe understood the importance of having to do it, and the fact that it was her friend Helga who was doing it instead of her was amazing. Helga deserved every minute of her spotlight, and Phoebe was very proud of her.

“So, Phees, I cannot believe they are letting you take a vacation at this point.” Helga leaned back against her chair, sipping on a cup of tea. “What, they sick of you at the hospital or something?”

Phoebe laughed, both hands clasping the warm cup of coffee she was holding. “While I do like the work I am doing, Helga, they have told me that I have somehow managed to accumulate a whole month’s worth of leave days, and they threatened to make me take them in batches or bench me for an entire month. So I’m spending maybe a week here, visiting you, and then maybe going back to Hillwood for another week, visit Mom and Dad. “
Helga smiled. “Hillwood huh? Still can’t believe people we know still live there.”

“Oh, but they do!” Phoebe insisted. “Remember Harold? He runs the butcher shop now, do you know he’s part of some local business owners association there? He even somehow managed to make it a whole proper deli, along with a salad bar. The vegans are not happy, of course.”

Helga laughed. “Crap, he must get a lot of protestors.”

“Yeah, it’s not very conducive. But he does his best.” Phoebe placed her coffee cup back on the saucer. “And you know about Gerald as well, he’s working at TalkBuzz, which Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd is the founder of—“

“How is the dear old Princess anyway?” Helga drawled sarcastically, but her eyes showed fondness at the mention of her old classmate.

“Doing pretty great from what I understand!” Phoebe chirped. “She’s running a multi-media company that millions of people are logging on to, although she keeps making the staff do videos on stuff she clearly likes, like that video on the history of heels, or that one video making people wearing Caprinis or something—“

“I mean personal life wise, Pheebs,” Helga said.

“Oh, sorry!” Phoebe squeaked, an old habit from her childhood days. Phoebe may have become more confident and more assertive in the time since they were babies, especially when dealing with the rather toxic boys club that was the medical field, but she did sometimes slip back to old traits, especially when talking to Helga. It endeared and made Helga a little guilty when that happened, her old bossypants self really shouldn’t have bossed Phoebe around so much.

They did talk about it before though, after a particularly long day a few years ago, when Phoebe was at the end of her tether. She and Helga managed to sit down and talk it over Skype and they managed to come to an agreement: Helga had to stop taking her feelings out on Phoebe and Phoebe had to speak up when she was upset about something. Phoebe agreed, and they both were working on it slowly, but together as best friends.

“Not sure, last I saw on Facebook, she was off at another social launch again, with her new beau.” Phoebe continued. “Investment banker, from what I heard. Rich white guy.”

Helga raised her eyes. “Is there any other type?”

Phoebe slapped Helga in the arm with a cardigan sleeved arm and Helga laughed.

“It’s just so weird to think that we have been friends since we were practically babies, Helga.” Phoebe said quietly.

“Puh-lease, I’m lucky you even wanted to stick with me, Heyerdahl.” Helga teased, bending over to drink her tea. “Since we moved out when I was 12, I haven’t really been in contact with anyone else consistently beyond you, Patty, and Eugene. Oh, Eugene wanted me to say hi.”

“How’s the drag thing working out for him?” Phoebe asked.

“Meh, same old, same old. We argue a lot about him sprawling out on the couch wearing nothing but fishnets and pads, and ruining the couch with his makeup, but roaming with him is really cool,” said Helga. “He’s inspired me to live my best life, hashtag yolo.”

Phoebe giggled as their server came up, asking if they were interested in dessert. Both of them
looked at each other and went, “Ice Cream!”

Their server was, of course, perturbed. “I’m sorry, but I need more to work with, like any flavour or…”

They made their orders (a coconut sherbet for Phoebe, and a Salted Caramel scoop for Helga) and as the waiter left, they glanced at each other again and laughed.

“Oh cripes, I haven’t heard that code-name for so long!” Helga snorted, wiping a tear from her eye. “How frigging hysterical!”

Phoebe giggled, a little more delicately than Helga’s boisterous laughs. It was rare to hear Helga so happy at any mention of her past feelings of love, and truth be told, it was a good thing. Helga tended to get very emotional when it came to the people she liked, and a little too intense when there was an inkling that they liked her back. This stemmed all the way back when they were children, during the height of Helga’s obsession with the Football-headed boy, and somehow Helga had handled it all the way from middle school all the way to college. Somehow, Helga, in her stubborn, oblivious way, didn’t realise that love was not a game, and there was no competition in winning love or losing it. At the same time, Helga worried way too much. It wasn’t as obvious as before, but back then, as a teenager, Helga had dealt with a lot of issues that caused her to become crippled with anxiety. This meant that she was unable to talk to anyone with regards to feelings and sometimes overcompensated too much to prove that she loved someone.

This also meant that for a long time, Helga never had a serious partner. She was always either trying too hard to win someone over or pining over regrets of never telling the people she liked that she had really strong feelings for them. But now, she was laughing over some of her discretions. It seemed that therapy and time away from the situation was helping Helga. She seemed to finally be able to relax and see how things went without worrying way too much about the consequences.

Phoebe might never admit it, but she was glad Helga managed to find a community of her own that loved her and let her love them in return for no obligations.

“How is Arnoldo, anyway?” Helga asked. Their ice creams had arrived and she dipped her little plastic spoon into the small bowl of ice cream.

“Arnold?” Phoebe said, digging into hers. “He’s doing fine, the last time I spoke to Gerald. Do you know he’s teaching? No lie, he’s teaching the 4th-grade class in PS118.”

“That’s great.” Helga said sincerely, over a mouthful of salted caramel. “I always thought he would make a great teacher. Wasn’t he always going around telling kids not to sin, and to always do the right thing and stuff? I absolutely cannot believe I used to follow him around and got so much footage we practically made a movie out of him.” She paused right then. “Oh, criminny, he’s frigging Captain America! Think about it! The jazz, the whole obsession with finding people from his past, his do-gooder attitude, THE BLONDE HAIR-“

“YES!” Phoebe gasped, and they started laughing hysterically, because to imagine 9-year-old Arnold Shortman dressed like Captain America was amazing, because THINK OF THE HELMET TO FIT HIS HEAD.

“What did you do to the videos in the end?” Phoebe asked, when they had both stopped crying from the laughing they had done. “I didn’t want to assume, but did you throw the tapes away?”
“Got it in one, bucko,” Helga said.

“Oh my, but so much material—“

“I talked to someone about it, after Miriam died.” Helga said. Her mom passing was still something she didn’t really like to talk about with most people, but Phoebe was family, she could tell her anything. “They said that holding on to those tapes when I was so far away from a childhood crush that didn’t amount to anything was never going to help me much and that clinging on to the past was never going to help me develop and find my own future. It hurt like a motherfuck, I swear to god. But they were right.”

Phoebe nodded thoughtfully, deep in thought.

“I did keep the locket though,” Helga added. “It’s the only thing left of Arnold I have left.”

Phoebe made a noise, a sad noise.

“No no, it’s not me clinging on to something that will never happen!” Helga protested. She paused, “Well maybe it is. You know what? I’m not in love with him anymore, I don’t think. If I ever see him again? I’ll thank him. Even if nothing came out of it, he still helped me through a lot of bad times when we were kids.”

Phoebe looked at her all of a sudden like she was seeing someone entirely new. She knew this, of course, that Helga now was a far cry from the obsessive, paranoid, angry kid from the past, and she had worked hard to do so. She did so wish that Helga had told Arnold that she loved him, and how different life would have been if it was, but life did not go the same route as wish-fulfilment. And Helga did the best she could.

“Oh, Helga” Phoebe whispered. Tears glistened in her eyes, Phoebe stared at Helga with a touch of what could be seen as pride and love.

“Oh criminy, don’t do this to me now, Pheeb-” Helga panicked and tried to reach across the table to hug her. Friendship was so weird, but it was great that she had Phoebe on her side for the most of it.

They got back to the apartment, giggling and on a high of ice cream and reminiscence.

Helga’s roommate poked his head out of his room and his face lit up when he saw Phoebe. “Phoebe! You’re here!”

“Couldn’t miss visiting Helga without visiting her glamourpuss roommate now, could I?” Phoebe hugged him. “Are you working out now? I didn’t manage to do so when I was working in the hospital so it would be great to have drag queen performance extraordinaire Jinkx Fortuna to help me out. “

Eugene grinned. Outside of drag and YouTubing, he was a Choreographer that taught little kids how to dance and prep them for competitions. He would know a thing or two about keeping fit and looking amazing while doing it. “Well, what are you doing? Where’s your luggage? Put it in Helga’s room and meet me in the living room after you get changed, we have work to do!”
The burst of activity gave Helga the opportunity to get her jacket off and toss it on the couch, collapsing against the soft back of the old but squishy couch and closing her eyes. If they were going to get started on activities so quickly, it might be good to get some shut-eye in before the big stuff had to happen. She opened her eyes lazily at the coffee table in front of her and that’s when she noticed the giant Manila envelope on the table.

“Hey, Eugene!” She yelled, hoping her voice was loud enough to travel to Eugene’s room. What was she thinking, of course, it was. “What’s in the envelope?”

Eugene’s reply was muffled, but Helga managed to gather that it had something to do with Helga, judging by the way he managed to get the word, “Fran” pretty clearly, and the fact that the words, “HELGA, READ THIS, IT’S FROM FRAN, ME, YOUR AGENT, READ ME” was scrawled all over the envelope.

She unravelled the little tiny string that made itself into a figure 8, and poured out the contents on the table. Somehow Fran had managed to, in the 2 hrs since Helga last spoke to her, organise book signings, an interview and even 2-3 convention/writers’ festival appearances in the next few months. It was actually rather impressive. She might consider sending her a cheese plate to express her thanks for making it way less low-scale instead of the touring extravaganza she made her do the first-time Umbrella Girl came out.

She scanned the documents, looking for any details of the places she might be going to. The last convention was held alongside the East Coast of the US, probably because she wasn’t as well known and it felt safer to go to conventions that were nearer by Michigan. Hopefully this time, she might have a go at the bigger leagues, like San Diego Comic-Con or something-

Her eyes fell onto one of the places that she was apparently doing book signings at.

The Comics Store, Hillwood.

How in tarnation-

She looked at the paper again. Not only was she supposed to be doing a signing there, she was apparently supposed to go for a convention the day after, coincidentally held in a nearby town 40 minutes away from Hilwood, if she remembered correctly. They were proposing to stay in Hilwood for a week before going to the other places for book signings, as well as scheduling an interview with the local press there.

“Pheebs! Eugene!!! Get in here!”

“So, Hillwood, huh?” said Phoebe slowly.

The three of them were seated around the coffee table, looking at the itinerary with a feeling of dread.

“I can’t go back there!” Helga moaned, head on the coffee table where it had been on for the past few minutes.

The two of them glanced at each other in sympathy. Both of them had dashed out quickly in response to Helga’s shriek, and so they were both half-undressed or dishelved. Phoebe was in the midst of getting out of her sweater into a tank top suitable for working out and Eugene was
apparently trying to put on a sparkly bandana right that seemed to be snagged onto his red curls and nearly falling off.

“Well, it wouldn’t be so bad, Helga.” Phoebe murmured. “Look at the date: It’s at the same time that I would probably be going back to visit mom and dad anyway, and I could go with you to the convention for moral support- “

“Oh, also, I could book a few bars in Seattle too!” enthused Eugene, never one to see the downside on anything. “I heard that the LGBTQ scene is amazing there now, I should go back and see how it is, get some networking on- “

Helga looked up at the two most supportive people in her life at the moment. “What if I panic when I see someone I used to know and they hate me or something?” she muttered, now a bit sadder and letting her head thunk back down on the coffee table. Phoebe’s little, “No don’t!” and Eugene’s “No no, that table is one thunk away from breaking,” didn’t distract her.

While Helga didn’t have anything huge against Hillwood, she never wanted to return there, for a variety of reasons.

The first: that was the place where she got most of her neuroses and anxiety from. Why would she return to a place that triggered that part of her?

The second: Big Bob had moved back to Hillwood to get back in touch with his roots, or something like that. He was living with Olga and her husband. If it was announced that she was going to be in Hillwood for a couple of days, didn’t that mean she had to go see him? He had landed the blame solely on her when Miriam died, calling her out as the sole reason Miriam had done what she did, and not paying close enough attention to her mother. She understood that as him lashing out and that she was not the reason Miriam passed away, but it was hard to not let his toxic opinions get to her, and his toxic thoughts made hers worse.

The third: Before Helga had left…she may have lashed out a little when people kept coming over to say goodbye to her. And hurt a few feelings. She always did regret what she had done in a moment of pique and her rather toxic behaviour when leaving. She had only managed to make up to Phoebe and Patty, but only because she thought they were her only chances to do so. They had graciously accepted her apology and were always the first to get Helga out of it if she returned back to that kind of toxic behaviour.

Eugene was now currently stroking her back, making shushing noises.

“Helga, “and that was Phoebe, trying to get her attention. “Helga, look at me. “

She raised her head and looked at her best friend.

“Yes, you did hurt a lot of people when you left,” said Phoebe, in the straight, no-nonsense was she had when she was about to handle a particularly challenging tumour. “But that was…16, near 17 years ago. All of us have moved on, and you have done so much to prove you’re not the person that you were back then. Remember how hard it was for you to talk about your feelings besides anger? Past Helga would never have admitted that she was feeling scared about returning back to Hillwood. Past Helga would have threatened to punch a few people in the throat if they even mentioned a word. “

“Current Helga is more confident and not afraid in explaining her feelings.” soothed Eugene. “Current Helga is the best roommate I have ever had, especially when you got rid of two bullies for me, and got Patty to rain down hard on those homophobes that kept sending me threatening letters,
and told me to switch to a better dry cleaning company so I could get a quality cleaning at affordable prices.”

“No one will hold it against you for petty things you said to them near a decade ago. “Phoebe said. “We all knew you were upset. Remember when we were laughing at all the stuff that happened back then? It was so big to us, but now…we laugh.”

Eugene nodded as he got up, walking straight towards the fridge. “What we all need right now is a bit of Bailey’s.”

Phoebe turned back to Helga and softly said, “You don’t have to stay with Bob or see him. You have no obligation to visit him, or anyone else that has hurt you in the past. You don’t have to forgive them. And if you see anyone on the streets you have hurt in the past that don’t want to forgive you, that’s okay too.”

“And you don’t have to stay in Hillwood alone,” Eugene smirked. “Honey, we are coming with you. We are going to be your second guard. You can fight your own battles, but at least have a drink with us first.”

For the first time, Helga Pataki didn’t know what else to say. The other two got it anyway and gave Helga a hug. She hugged them back, and the rest of the evening was spent on drinking, watching really bad movies, and eating lots of cake.

Somehow, they did it.

Helga called Fran to confirm the itinerary, Eugene messaged his manager about his trip plans, and Phoebe called up her parents to tell them that she wouldn’t be staying at the house during her visit, but rooming with Eugene and Helga during the trip.

When Helga protested against this idea (“Pheebs what are you doing, they’re your parents, they want you under their roof and have dinner and stuff.” “Helga, I’ve told my parents the plan, they’re more concerned that you would be alone during the trip, they asked me to stay with you.” “I can’t make you take leave time just to babysit me.” “This isn’t about baby-sitting, Helga, don’t do this.” “Darlings, let’s not do this. Helga, accept Phoebe’s help. Phoebe, if you do this, you have to devote a lot of time with your parents to, at least 3 days, deal?” “Fine Eugene,” “Thanks, Jinkxy.”), Phoebe and Eugene won that argument, and soon, they were all discussing travel plans, what to wear and Eugene started trying to get them to rate outfits to wear at the bars.

Phoebe thought it would be cute if Helga wore something cosplay-y, and a lot of time was spent debating on outfits, something Helga was also against at first, until Eugene promised to lend her some outfits and a corset. Eugene had a few great outfits and somehow managed to accumulate a few petticoats and balloon skirts and pleather vests. She figured she could scrape a pretty decent steampunk outfit.

The rest of the week was spent relaxing, which was hard for someone like Phoebe, who had a habit of looking at the work emails and worrying about the amount of work she had left over, but also Helga, who tended to deal with her anxiety with writing, and then would immerse herself in it for hours on end until she got hungry, then ate whatever was in the kitchen, which tended to be stuff like instant pastas or ramen.

So, they decided to properly relax. They went for a spa and massage. Eugene made them attend a
class and they failed so badly trying to keep up with the kids (the judgement of the kids was so strong, Helga thought they learnt a little too much from Eugene’s colleague, Shoshana. Now she was very judgy about dance poses). Helga and Phoebe went to a karaoke bar for drinks, and sang so hard to K-Pop they almost fell down laughing because they were just that bad. They got a great day at the salon, and Helga got her faded pink hair redyed to a darker magenta, while Phoebe got a nice bob. They spent one night at Eugene’s local queer bar, where they properly enjoyed the drag performances and stand up comedic stylings, and Jinkx Fortuna danced her way to hundreds of dollars of tips (she was just that good). They read books they didn’t have time to read. They shopped for makeup and tried on clothes for the winter. It was great, just the two (and sometimes three) of them.

When the day of the Hillwood convention and book signing came, the three of them grabbed their packed suitcases and got on the plane that would take them to Seattle. They were stuck in economy (Fran couldn’t get three business tickets, she wasn’t that much of a miracle worker), but they were still able to be seated together.

Helga looked out the window to the skies underneath. Phoebe was playing something on phone, Eugene had fallen asleep. The blonde just stared out at the clouds, just enjoying the day. She noticed one of the clouds was shaped almost like a football. That reminded her of her childhood crush and she sighed. She didn’t regret destroying the tapes, or even dismantling the shrine. They helped her cope during a bad situation, but she had started relying on them like a crutch, and it wasn’t good for her to keep doing that, thinking that a blonde boy would be her saviour and her dream.

The good thing about the schedule was that it didn’t seem like she would be able to have time to explore. Fran had assured her that with the interview, the four-day convention, and the book signing, she wouldn’t have time to relax her “little tush down.” Adding to that was Phoebe’s parents inviting Eugene and her over for dinner at one point, Helga didn’t indeed have enough time to ruminate on Hillwood, Big Bob, her mother, and anyone she may have hurt in the past.

She thought, maybe, just maybe, it wouldn’t be too eventful a trip beyond the convention and the book signing. What could possibly go wrong anyway?
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

"Sunday." Arnold sighed in relief, leaning against the high breakfast counter in the apartment. "Thank god for Sunday. Sunday with nobody but my best friend and no mention of work, no teasing family members, no books to attack me, no 4th graders, no Helga Pataki."

In which Arnold is the plaything of the universe for one week. It's pretty funny.

To everyone else that is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You know the moment when you hear something you haven’t heard of in a long while, and then, suddenly, like a hurricane, mentions of the thing appear every frigging where and you’re constantly barraged?

That was what had happened to Arnold with regards to Helga G Pataki.

On Monday, as he stepped into the staffroom, his colleague and burgeoning best friend in the office Nadine saw him and squealed, thrusting a book towards his chest. Well, less a thrust and more a slap.

“What was that for?” gasped Arnold as the sting of the book hitting his chest nearly took the breath out of him, his hand shooting out to try and soothe the pain in his chest. Nadine may have become a science teacher, but man she should have taken up jujitsu or something, damnit.

“Arnold. Shortman.” Nadine intoned, staring at him straight in the eyes. “I am about to become your best friend and ultimate provider of literature.”

Coughing, he managed to lean against a desk to steady his footing. Luckily, the desk was his own. “So why did you hit me if you were giving me things to read?”

“Because, Arnold, this is going to be the book of our generation,” Nadine replied. “Rhonda made me read the first book in this series, and the second book is going to be released soon, so I’m sharing this gospel far and wide. You’re an English teacher, you’re SUPPOSED to know what good stuff is.”

Still wincing at the impact of a moving rectangle hitting him right in the chest, (he could have sworn one of his nipples was now a pancake), he opened one eye to look down at what Nadine had attacked him with.

Umbrella Girl, written by Helga G Pataki, art by Sana Takeda.

“I know right!” Nadine squealed. “Helga Pataki has finally made the big leagues! Look at the cover art, it’s so shiny and pretty.” She had now started stroking the cover in a creepy manner, that if done on an actual person would be very very very very very rude. “SHIIIIINNYYYYYY.”

Arnold took the book and gave it a quick scan, pausing on the page where the artist and author
dedication usually was.

Helga’s was a simple one-liner: To all the kids out there who are still looking for their own umbrellas.

That probably meant something to Helga but to someone who didn’t know Helga that well, it was probably gibberish. Still, Arnold did feel a certain sort of kinship with that dedication. It touched him, but he had yet to figure out why.

He flipped through the rest of the book. On the first impression, it seemed like the artist’s work was most dominant, with details so perfect and symmetrical that it was almost like holding on to a painting. Arnold was pretty sure he was not holding a graphic novel but some sort of bejewelled text instead.

He stopped at one panel where a redhead wearing a dress was flung backwards, holding on to an unfurling umbrella that was pointed outwards. The text that accompanied the panel was made to look like it was inked on a scroll.

“Why, Miss Alice. Falling back to Wonderland again? I find it so hard to believe that you are a victim here when we find you here so often.” He murmured, reading the panel. He frowned. “What does that even mean-“

“Uh uh uh!” Nadine shushed, “You wanna know how and why it’s happening, you read the entire thing. It’s a book about trauma, about becoming stronger, about learning more about your latent abilities and reclaiming your own choices. I know you’re doing a class on Female Authors, and this pointing at the book,” is what you NEED to read.”

Arnold doubted that this book was exactly as beautiful as the time he read Charlotte’s Web, or his first Agatha Caulfield novel, but he decided that 1) angering someone who was best friends with Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd was something not recommended, and 2) His poetry book he ordered from eBay had not arrived yet, and he was getting a bit bored without something to read on the bus to school, so why not.

On Tuesday, Arnold, whose brain was working in the mode where you were half asleep and yet perfectly buzzing with activity, walked into the library to book the computer labs for class, and came face to face with Helga Pataki.

Or rather, a standee of Helga Pataki.

“What on earth,” Arnold stated flatly. The standee was slightly shorter than Arnold himself, who had gone through a growth spurt back in high school and was pretty decently tall at 5 ft 10. In his grumpiness to try and book the labs, he hadn’t paid attention and had nearly hit Helga in the same fashion they had done when they were kids.

“Ah, Mr Shortman, I am so sorry!” a panicky librarian ran in, clutching a bag of things that for some reason consisted on balls of string, duct tape, chicken feathers, and way too many post-its. “We were supposed to put the standee at the side of the entrance instead of the front, a newbie must have put it there, gah, I am so sorry!”

Arnold had to force himself to throw her a reassuring smile, even though at the moment he was trying to push down his mixture of shock and irritation at having another day nearly getting attacked by something Helga related. “I’m fine, Amelia. Perfectly fine. I can move the standee aside for you,
but can you tell me if you can book the labs for me for my 4th-grade class? I need it for 9.30-10.30am.”

While Amelia was now dropping everything to help a member of staff with his request, (literally dropping everything, Arnold could see now that the chicken feathers were less feathers and in actual fact a live chicken, who had landed on the floor ungainly with a squawk and was now trying to run away), he chanced a look at the standee again. Helga Pataki was dressed in a leather jacket and pants, doc martens ever present, and she had a little smirk on her lips. Her standee had a little speech bubble next to her where you could write what you needed people to hear about. At the moment, the standee was saying, “Hey, join Our Gang. Become a reader!”

Amelia had finished doing the bookings and went to his side to join him. “Ah, so you like Helga Pataki, huh?” she said.

Arnold stumbled back, a little embarrassed at having been caught staring at a standee for way too long. “Ah no no, she’s- erm.” He cast his mind around to figure out what he and Helga were.

“No need to explain, Mr Shortman.” Amelia waved a hand to dismiss his panic. “It’s, 'Slam Bam Thank You M’am’ Pataki! She is amazing, and I’m not saying it as someone who has a crush on blonde, leather jacket wearing poets. Have you read her poetry? I think it’s a great exploration and deconstruction of society and makes a lot of social commentary on the problems of the family. Principal Wurtz thought it would be a good example to have a local girl gone good ambassador for the library-”

*What was it with everyone and Helga? He wondered, now getting a little more irate. Why have I not heard about how amazing and how cool she is until last week?! How is it that I am only learning NOW that she has a cool poet nickname? Is it me? Am I so behind the times?*

He had nearly considered the next thought, which was, “No, it’s the children who are wrong” before he realised that the Simpsons rerun he watched on Sunday was not relevant to this situation. He decided to distract Amelia with the words, “Hey, that’s the chicken you were holding on to, right?”

Amelia squeaked and ran after the fluffy feathered fiend, and Arnold was left with his thoughts, which was a relief.

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On Wednesday, no Helga Pataki accidents occurred in school, which was good for Arnold, because he was pretty sure his nipple would never recover from the shock of being flattened for the rest of his life.

The same could not be said when he reached home, opened up his letterbox that was situated at the top of the organized grids, and reached for a letter. He didn’t notice that there was a small parcel on top of the letter and when he yanked it out, the parcel fell out and hit him on the head.

When he stopped yelling and opened his eyes, he spied on the parcel that fell on him, and it turned out to be the book he got from eBay.

The one he got that was written by Helga.

He was convinced the world really hated him.

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He spent Wednesday night reading Umbrella Girl, then reading the poetry book.
He decided that he would take the morning of Thursday to figure out how he felt about the books, but so far, he was really really really impressed.

Thursday was a bit of a catastrophe.

For one thing, he missed his stop on his way to school because he was so busy underlining and annotating the poetry book.

But you couldn’t blame him for that! **Moonlit Soliloquys** was AMAZING.

Considering the fact that it was supposed to be a book on poetry, Helga had broken every single rule of what he knew about poetry and somehow managed to make it her own. The paragraphs that spoke about weightlessness, the discussion of heaven and the divine, one or two poems about family that Arnold did not want to think too heavily about, and a story about meditation under the moon.

That one, Arnold really liked. The subject was narrating about cotton plants lit under a big bright moon, like people that were bowing their heads in prayer, and how it was that no matter how long or where it was, humanity had always prostrated itself under a being unknown to them because they needed guidance, and that unknown was comforting. He wondered if Helga had actually done so, and wondered where and when she could have time to do that.

He was so into his thoughts about that particular poem that he slipped and fell over a bucket the janitor had left in the hallway.

“Oh, my god, Shortman!” the janitor screamed. “What are you doing there? Stop walking into things! My poor bucket! Now you’re making this floor all wet!”

Arnold, who had skidded on the floor when he had tripped, surveyed himself and realised he would have to change his pants and shirt before walking into a class that was very likely to laugh him out of the door.

Luckily, he had a spare shirt and pants he kept in the drawer at his desk. But he would have to be quick.

Rushing into the staffroom, he nearly bumped into Nadine, who was carrying a terrarium she must have been prepping for her science class. “Arnold! “she squealed, then frowned. “Why are you all wet? Did you read my book yet? Also, is your chest winking at me cause there’s one nipple showing out of your shirt but not on the other side- “

“Oh, my god, Shortman!” the janitor screamed. “What are you doing there? Stop walking into things! My poor bucket! Now you’re making this floor all wet!”

Nadine snorted. “I’ve apologised ten times, Arnold. Besides, from what I know, you don’t have anyone you want your chest to be intimate with. No sexystimes with you.” she teased as she sailed out the door.

“Nadine, I love you, but thanks to what you hit my chest with, my nipple has never been the same.” Grumbled Arnold. “I can’t feel anything there now.”

“Nadine snorted. “I’ve apologised ten times, Arnold. Besides, from what I know, you don’t have anyone you want your chest to be intimate with. No sexystimes with you.” she teased as she sailed out the door.

“You owe me a new nipple, Nadine!” he pushed open the door to yell at the back of a sniggering Nadine. The hallway went silent as students of all grades turned to look at the usually composed and friendly Mr Shortman who was now wet, dishelved and yelling about nipples. One of them was Jayden, who was looking super confused, while the students in his 4th-grade class were sniggering.

Arnold decided that today was officially cancelled.
Friday was good. Friday was fine.

Friday was amazing until he bumped into Helga’s dad.

Helga’s dad, in Arnold’s childhood, was a big, imposing figure with forearms that could tear through tree trunks, eyebrows thick and bushy, and eyes that would sear through your soul like a laser. When seen through a nine-year-old’s eyes, he was a giant.

Now, he was a little smaller, and through the years he had lost some of the intimidation. Arnold was almost as tall as he was, and Big Bob Pataki had grey streaked all over his head, and a bald spot that had made its way through years ago and took centre stage at the back of his head. He still retained the barrel-chested frame he was famed for in his youth, but now with the way his shoulders were slumped forward, he looked almost defeated.

“Ay, watch where you’re going, pipsqueak!” Big Bob had barked. He now wore rimless glasses which he pushed up his nose and saw that he had in fact run over a blonde adult male instead of a small child. “Oh yeah, didn’t see you there.”

“Mr…Pataki?” Arnold had stuttered, not believing his damn luck. Wasn’t he supposed to be in Michigan or something?

Big Bob stared at him, squinting a little through his glasses, and grunted, “Oh yeah, you’re that kid, the football-headed one…Armando, right?”

“Arnold actually,” Arnold muttered.

“Yeah yeah yeah, Armando. One of Olga’s little friends.” Big Bob waved it away casually. “You’re tall now, huh? Well, it makes sense for boys to grow up strong and tall, thought you would be a pipsqueak all your life. Girls like that stuff.”

Arnold wanted to dictate the importance of not laying down expectations of what masculinity was to people but decided to leave it alone.

“You see Helga or something?” Big Bob asked, and Arnold shook his head. “Hmph. Thought she would talk to you of all people. Can’t get contact with that girl now that she’s a writer. Too hoity for her family now.”

Arnold wanted to disengage from this conversation but figured it would be good for the elderly to keep ranting on a bit.

“Yeah, you know she’s a writer now?” Big Bob had continued. “Works for some big corporation. Pah! Big corporations are the reasons why people suffer! I was my own boss when I was her age, and I knew the game-“

He had continued to keep talking and made an unwilling Arnold his audience for another good 5 minutes until Arnold faked a phone call, and told Big Bob that it was great seeing him, so long now, bye bye.

He managed to get away to as far as the local comic book store, but something stopped him. Namely, the same standee that had assaulted him on Tuesday in the library. The speech bubble, though, said something different.
 septembre, book signings, I will be there, lolerskates!

Helga was coming here? To Hillwood? Holy crap.

He wondered if the Comics Bookstore would let him line up to get a poetry book signed.

He decided to go home and just re-read Umbrella Girl to feel better about his life choices.

“So, I heard you bumped into Big Bob Pataki.” said Grandpa Phil at the Sunset Arms on Saturday.

Arnold groaned. “How did you know?” He swore his grandfather knew every bit of gossip in town.

“Well, short man, Freddie Jarvis saw you two, and then told Biddy Flanders, who told Nana Johanssen, who told Pookie, who then told me!” he said, smug at being the head of every game of Telephone. Coincidentally enough, his grandmother was dressed like Lady Gaga in the music video, wearing a white tablecloth, a yellow wig, and their old telephone balanced on it. Arnold would have tried to get the phone out of her head if not for the fact that he remembered that it was not the one they were currently using.

“Bob Pataki is here?” Miles asked, wrinkling his nose. While he was showing signs of greying hair on his temples, he still looked and moved like a man near half his age. At the moment, the older man was wrinkling his nose at the thought of Big Bob. They had met a few times before, the first during the San Lorenzo trip. Long story short, the two of them did not get along well.

“Well, it’s a recent development.” Stella chimed in. “It happened like, hm…” She thought for a bit before she turned back to yell at someone in the kitchen. “Thien! When did we see that moving van when we went shopping for Christmas Sweaters?”

“The 25th of August, Stella!” yelled Mr Hyunh, who had become best friends with Stella Shortman when she and Miles had returned back from San Lorenzo, and they bonded over their love for country music, herbal remedies, and being separated from their children for long periods of time.

Stella turned back and nodded. “Yeah, August. You would have been swamped with planning the curriculum for the new school year, and helping Gerald with that new video he was filming. You probably didn’t notice.”

It seemed like life had somehow conspired to hide any news of the Patakis from him the last few months, Arnold thought. He then frowned, when one detail of the conversation stood out.

“Why were you shopping for Christmas sweaters in the summer, mom?”

“Cause it’s cheaper, that’s why ” Stella replied. Miles and Mr Hyunh, who came out of the kitchen holding a huge bowl of soup, both nodded with confidence as if it was one of the most common facts in the world that was totally understandable.

Arnold decided not to question how everyone in the world seemed to know things he didn’t.

“How’s Gerald doing?” asked Miles. “Still making films with that place he works for?”

“Yeap.” Arnold started passing the empty plates around for every place at the table. Grandpa Phil was at one side of the table, while Miles sat across from him. Grandma Gertie, Mr Hyunh, Oskar
Kakoshka and Ernie Potts all gathered around the table, loading up on their plates. Stella herself took a seat between Arnold and Mr Hyunh.

“Now,” said Stella, a twinkle in her eye that Arnold only caught sight off before he knew he was about to enter dangerous territory. “I also saw that the blonde girl was coming back to Hillwood.”

This made Grandma Gertie jump up, “Eleanor Roosevelt is coming back? Hot diggity! It’s time we celebrate the 4th of July again!”

She raced away from the table, going up the stairs two at a time to grab a good costume and the choicest of fireworks.

Arnold groaned. “Not you too, mom!”

“What?” said Stella, pure innocence. She shared a look of mischief with Miles, who sniggered.

“I swear, it’s like the whole world is trying to remind me that Helga Pataki exists and is coming back!” cried Arnold. "Monday, someone slapped me with a book of hers. I ran into a standee of hers on Tuesday. Wednesday I get hit with her book on the forehead, and Thursday that book made me late for school, wet my pants and shirt, and humiliate me in front of my class. Then I run into Bob Pataki, he makes me sit and listen to every single bit of shit he says-"

(Grandpa whistled, "Wooh, a swear word, this is serious!")

"-And then now I find out Helga is coming back to Hillwood like she doesn't know how much of my week she has affected and made miserable! It's like 4th grade all over again!"

Stella and Miles looked at each other. Mr Hyunh was smiling jubilantly. Ernie and Oskar were nudging each other and sniggering. Grandpa Phil was...GRINNING AT HIS MISERY.

And now Grandma Gertie was sailing in, in her favourite 4th of July costume and holding a stick of dynamite.

"To the death of the Red Coats, Sonny Jim!" she cackled as she danced around the room with her favourite type of sparkler.

Arnold really wished he had a new family who wasn’t so abnormal.

"Sunday." Arnold sighed in relief, leaning against the high breakfast counter in the apartment. "Thank god for Sunday. Sunday with nobody but my best friend and no mention of work, no teasing family members, no books to attack me, no 4th graders, no one commenting on my poor nipple, no Helga Pataki-"

Gerald's phone beeped, and Gerald unlocked his phone to read his message. "Hey, speak of the devil! TalkBuzz is doing an interview with Helga Pataki herself! She’ll be in our studios on Tuesday for a Youtube video!"

"SON OF A -"
SANA TAKEDA DID THE ART FOR MONSTRESS, AND I URGE YOU TO PROSTRATE YOURSELF AT THE FEET OF THIS WORK AND CRY.

Also I really love Majorie Liu, she signed my copy of Monstress once.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Helga gets a message, Eugene meets a boy, and Nadine gets Arnold to do stuff with her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Welp, here we are, whoop dee doo.

That’s what Helga thought when she, Eugene, and Phoebe arrived outside the airport, waiting outside for their Uber. Eugene took the opportunity to record an Instastory for his Instagram, and Helga decided to take a page from his book and opened her Twitter app.

Her timeline loaded up, and Helga took the opportunity to get a quick scan of her tweets, and if there were any new mentions. A couple of them seem to be squealing over her upcoming book signings, one was asking if she could help retweet his post about a spare ticket for the Hillwood convention and a DM from a twitter handle she had not seen before.

@ladyolgaga Hey lil sis. Heard you were coming back to Hillwood. I know you don’t wanna talk to us at all, considering what Daddy said. But can we at the very least have tea? I need to talk to you regarding lawyers stuff, Trevor and I are sorting out wills and what not. And it would be good to say hi to my baby sister. Sorry I had to dm you, but I wasn’t sure if you had changed numbers or emails since the last time Daddy spoke to you.

Let me know.

Helga closed the message with an inscrutable look. She turned back to her notifications, replied to some, retweeted others, and made one tweet about landing at Hillwood and man, she hoped there were tacos somewhere. She then snapped a selfie of herself, Eugene, and Phoebe, attached the pic to the tweet, and sent it.

While she did indeed not have a Facebook account, Helga had created a Twitter and an Instagram account on the advice of Fran, who told her that it was a great way to communicate news and story ideas to her readership.

Since then, Helga had slowly garnered a steady number of followers who seemed to enjoy her tweets, especially when she shared her love for the upcoming Marvel movies, cat gifs, and her live tweeting of crappy reality tv shows. It was super weird to have a community of virtual strangers claim that they loved her and her work, and she had her fair share of followers calling her Mother and proposing to her regularly.

It was surreal to be on the other side of the worshipping phase.

“When is the Uber coming in, Eugene?” Helga called out to the redhead, who for some reason seemed to have acquired a full mink coat that he took out to wear once they had landed, donning
sunglasses and a beret to complete the look. When Eugene went full diva, he really went full diva.

“I don’t know, Phoebe booked it!” Eugene replied. Phoebe, who was on the phone calling her parents to let them know they had safely landed, was a little a way from them, talking on the phone and giving them an ETA of when they were arriving in the Air BnB Fran had booked for the three of them.

Helga sighed. She remembered the last time she had been at the Hillwood airport, and it was when she, Bob, Miriam and Olga were moving to Michigan. Olga at the time was sobbing at the, "amount of memories she had of Hillwood, oh, mommy, daddy, can’t we just come back once in awhile-"

Helga had slapped on a pair of earphones to block out the noise of Olga’s sobbing, figuring that this was probably the worst occasion that Olga would be crying at. That would later be proven wrong the day of the funeral. But she didn’t want to talk about it now.

It felt like time had never stopped running in Hillwood. She had to admire the resolution of a place to remain exactly the same as it was 17 years ago.

“Oh that’s the Uber, thank god, let’s get the things in!”

Eugene did not pack light.

That was understandable. His drag outfits, wigs and dresses and makeup, along with headdresses, took up at least three huge bags. Phoebe brought all her items in a nifty trolley bag along with her handbag and Helga’s duffel and trolley bag completed the whole set.

There wasn’t that much space for a normal Uber car, so they had to book a 6-seater just to pack everything in.

That would result in a dilemma that Helga didn’t want.

“Well, if it ain’t them kindred spirits they keep talking about in church!”

That Southern Twang came from the diver who had got out of the driver’s seat to help them with their luggage.

“Stinky Peterson?” Phoebe was the only one able to speak when faced with a face from their past. “You’re the 6-seater Uber driver?”

“Gosh, I’m the ONLY 6-Seater Uber driver, on account of the fact that Hillwood is small and all. “the tall man had drawled. He had always been tall, but somehow, he had managed to stretch up like taffy, all bones and bony joints. His resemblance to a stork was still evident, but time had softened some of his features, adding a few lines here and there, like under his eyes, the edges of his mouth, and the little space between his near translucent brows. “Phoebe Heyerdahl, I do declare you are looking swell since you became a doctor and all, and you and your friends look charming! All here to visit your childhood home, huh?”

Phoebe managed to recover faster than the other two had, and her game face was on, “Y-Yes! Well, that’s great! We just need to move some of these bags up into the car if possible?”

“Shure thang, Miss Phoebe!” Stinky replied, going over to extend the boot in his six-seater van. He tipped his cap off to both Eugene and Helga. “Sir, Ma’m” before he went to grab one of Eugene’s bags.
Helga and Eugene had started moving quietly over to Phoebe, who was herself a little panicked.

“What do we do?” Eugene whispered hotly, digging his dark blue nails into the fleshy part of his palm.

“Just…keep calm.” Phoebe advised. “He doesn’t seem to know who you two are, the credit card and account details are under my name, just be quiet throughout the trip and we will do fine. If needed, I’ll just talk to Stinky.”

Eugene nodded, slipping into the Bad Bitch mode that he had managed to cultivate when he was in drag, pulled out his sunglasses and placed them on his nose, and proceeded to strut a la Miranda Priestly and climb into the back of the car. Helga tried to follow suit, thankful that her docs and her leather jacket made it easier to portray swagger that she really didn’t have, and joined Eugene at the back. Phoebe took the front, grinning nervously.

Luckily, Stinky Petersen, while prone to stating the most obvious things in the room, was also most likely unable to read a room, and only mentioned, “That’s a lot of luggage you and your friends have.”

Phoebe chuckled, in a tone she had often used when having to talk to pompous white male Doctors during medical conferences and started a long, very light chat with Stinky, who seemed glad to speak to someone who liked chatter.

Helga had feigned sleep as soon as she got into the car, and Eugene, having perfected the ultimate resting Bitch face, was now scrolling through his Instagram and Twitter, a fingertip perfectly pressed against the screen, and scrolling carelessly through social media.

They managed to get through most of the trip rather uneventfully, save for one part.

They had just driven closer to the neighbourhood that they as children frequented. Helga was doing a great job doing the, "lean head against the window and pretend to nod off” move that she had learnt when she was very bored, when they had driven up next to the Comics Book Shop, where they saw a standee of Helga, leather jacket and all, looking ferocious and inviting people to come join her for the book signing.

Phoebe of course had spotted the standee first. Her eyes had widened and she had to slap a hand against her mouth to avoid any noises expressing surprise.

Eugene and Helga were next. Helga, having managed to get a good vantage point where she was pretending to sleep, saw a picture of herself at the comics window and started screaming internally. “Damnit Frannie!” She growled in her head, vowing to call her as soon as they got out of here to yell at her about the standees. “I told her I didn’t want standees! Shit, does the whole town know I’m back? That’s the most updated picture of me they have, they can recognise me!”

One corner of Eugene’s mouth was twitching. It was as though he was trying his best not to laugh.

“Well, garsh be dang, Helga G Pataki is coming back?” Stinky marveled, having decided to look at the direction Phoebe was looking at and noticed the standee and speech bubble that was announcing her arrival. “I haven’t seen her around since the 6th grade!” He squinted at the board, grinning a little. “She’s grown up a hell load pretty though, gotta say. Who would have thought ugly old Helga would grow up to be such a cockatoo?”

Helga flinched. Eugene had lowered his sunglasses to give the back of Stinky’s head such a glare that other queens in the past had spontaneously started crying.
“Hell, I mean, it would be good to see her back, but like the saying goes, a leopard can’t change it’s trunks. It stinks up the place and everyone knows when it poops or pees in it. Helga was a bitch, and she will always be a bitch.” Helga’s heart nearly stopped. Eugene had started casually examining his nails, as though wondering if they would break if he strangles someone’s pencil-thin neck.

Phoebe cleared her throat. “Stinky, Helga may not be here right now,” here she gave the prone form of Helga a glance before returning to Stinky, “but she is still my best friend, and I won’t tolerate that kind of talk that belittles my friend solely because of her appearance.”

“Oh garsh, Miss Phoebe, it was only a joke-”

Phoebe replied icily, “Doctor Heyerdahl, Stinky Petersen. Any meaner talk of Helga, and I won’t tolerate it, you get me?”

Stinky gamely assented, and the rest of the trip was fairly quiet. They got to their air BnB soon afterwards, and after they unloaded everything, Phoebe gave Stinky a generous tip, bade him on his way, and he left, still a bit confused but not taking it too seriously.

The three of them stood there after the car left, not knowing what to do. It was Eugene who spoke first. “Helga, love. Stinky’s not super smart. Remember the story of where he nearly caught me wearing a dress and kissing Shane McDausky, and I managed to convince him that it was my Cousin Genie who was kissing Shane? And that didn’t take much convincing too. He’s oblivious as fuck. He didn’t mean it.”

Helga thought about her sister’s dm, and thought about how close she had managed to reveal her identity to Stinky of all people in the first hour of returning back to Hillwood, and she decided that it was tiring being Helga G Pataki for now. It would do her some good to not have to think about the past and family obligations for a bit.

She turned and grumbled at the other two friends, “Let’s just get this luggage up, and take a shower. We’ll figure out what we want to do after that.

Arnold was nursing his third cup of coffee when Nadine came into the teacher’s lounge, tearing off her gloves and tossing them into the bin in a huge show of relief.

“5th Graders do NOT appreciate spiders, I swear.” Nadine had grumbled. “It’s all, ‘Ms Jones, I don’t think we should be studying Tarantulas at our level’ and ‘Oh wow, tarantulas are so ugly’ and ‘IT’S ON ME, IT’S ON MY FACE, IT’S SUCKING MY SOUL GET IT OFF ME.’” She grabbed a cup from the table and swallowed the contents without knowing what was inside.

Arnold was staring at Nadine’s form the entire time she ranted. She finally finished drinking, tossed the cup aside and collapsed on the couch next to him. She wiped her furrowed brow, and turned her head to look at Arnold. “Arnold, just marry me. You and I can run off, leave the children aside, scout the jungles and leave this all behind.”

Arnold took this proposal rather calmly, because Nadine had already proposed to him many times in the same manner before. “Nadine, we all know you’re dating that biologist working in the university nearby, and you’ve been planning to propose to them after 3 years. Also, I’m not your type. You keep telling me my head is too wide for your taste. You just want to get away from the children.”

Nadine nudged him, “Don’t ruin this for me. You’re ruining your chances for love, because you can’t get rid of logic,” she laughed. She sat up, “Did you read Umbrella Girl yet?”
Arnold opened an eye to look at the dark-skinned blonde woman. “Yes.”

“Annnnnnnnd?”

Arnold closed his eyes again. “It was- You were right.”

Nadine punched a fist in the air. “YAS.”

Arnold was truly in love with Umbrella Girl. The story of the main character Laila was enthralling, and was about her finding an old umbrella given to her by a wise old rabbit that led her to explore her past, battle shadow monsters, and find out what the Organization of the Red Queen was up to. Not much of the backstory was given away, but Arnold liked it. He did have a few issues with the pacing but he figured he could cut it a little slack, most books often had that problem, especially the first book of a series. All in all, the themes of the book made it feel like it was tearing into his soul. He never knew a book could make him feel that way, let alone a graphic novel written by Helga G Pataki.

“So what next?” Asked Nadine.

“Well, I was planning to start reading A Hundred Years of Solitude-”

Nadine gave him a look. “You’re not getting volume 2 of Umbrella Girl yet?”

“There’s a volume 2?” Arnold replied, confused. “Already?”

“Man, you’re not the most astute of people, huh?” Nadine said, maintaining the look. “It’s coming out on Wednesday, during the book signing. They’re having a double event, and getting it released early for Hillwood because Helga was born here and stuff. It was just announced last week.”

“Mhm...” Arnold said. He was considering if there was time to sneak off to get Volume 2 on Wednesday before the book signing, so he could get back home to mark papers.

“We should go to the signing,” continued Nadine.

Now that caught Arnold’s attention.

“Woah, no, no, I don’t need to go see Helga and get my book signed, I mean-“

Nadine looked disappointed at Arnold’s protests. “But we have to! It’s Umbrella Girl! Helga is going to be there! Sana couldn’t make it in time for the book signing because she’s in Japan right now, but you can’t miss an opportunity like this! Besides, it’s so rare for us both to actually KNOW an author! We can tell the kids we’re cool!”

“The kids like fidget spinners and slime, Nadine, not necessarily authors-“

“Pish posh, Arnold!” Nadine waved a hand. “We are going, you and me, we’ll be able to pick up a copy of the book then, and we will be able to get Helga to sign it. Capiche, white boy?”

“Eurgh, fine fine fine.” Arnold grumbled. After a week of having Helga intrude on his life in the most rudest of ways, he figured that doing this would please the universe into not attacking him with anything Pataki-related.

Helga, Eugene, and Phoebe had unpacked and were taking turns to use the shower and get ready to
get a bite to eat when there was a knock on the door.

“Hey, you folks settling in alright?” a gruff voice was heard, and a tall man appeared, leaning against the door frame. He had longish hair that had been slicked back into a top-knot, and a small scruffy beard to match his hipster aesthetic of green and black plaid, skinny jeans and a nose ring.

“Thanks Caleb, everything is great.” Phoebe reassured him. Caleb was the owner of the building, was one of the recent wave of hipsters that had invaded the city of Hillwood since the late 2000s, according to his profile, and rented a few apartments out for other hipsters looking for the ultimate coffee experience. Helga had rolled her eyes when she heard that, because dang the hipsters.

Caleb was cute though, if you liked that kind of aesthetic, and he knew who Helga was when they first met on the landing, with Caleb’s eyes growing wide and him blurting out, “Slam Bam Thank You Ma’m Pataki?! *THE* Helga Pataki?”

It turned out he had seen Helga’s slam beat poetry in a café somewhere back when she was in university, having toured a few cafes all around Michigan when her poetry had started taking off. He even had a copy of one of her poems calligraphed, painted and framed in the living room, and it was one of his most prized possessions. He had gotten excited and asked Helga if she would be able to autograph that particular poem, and Helga, blushing, had agreed to do so.

His excitement did not stop when he and Eugene locked eyes and Caleb eyes somehow got even wider.

“Oh my fuck. You’re Jinkx Fortuna. I follow you on Instagram! Oh my god, I love your coat, it makes you look so elegant. Not that you’re not elegant usually, I’ve seen your performances, you do wonderful dancing, I love the things you do with your hands, I erm-.” Caleb had stopped, his face was blushing so hard Helga thought he was about to have a heart attack, then he muttered something about bags, grabbed Phoebe’s trolley bag, and raced up the stairs.

Eugene had looked at the tall form racing up the stairs, himself blushing as hard as possible. “Oh my.” He tittered a little. “The scene is definitely here, and I seem to be very popular.”

Phoebe had giggled, Helga had rolled her eyes good naturedly, and they all trudged up the stairs to see their accommodations.

It was a great place for an Airbnb, not a place Helga would have picked usually (Fran did arrange this for her of course.) The place was a loft, with an open kitchen and living room concept. 4 rooms were available for the three of them to choose between themselves, and they were able to open the windows to air out the room a little. Caleb had left them alone to get used to the place they would be staying for the week, and they took the time to charge their phones and use the shower.

Eugene had gone first, being known as the fastest bather between the 3 of them. Helga and Phoebe got the fridge opened to see what would be a good thing to get at the supermarket later when Caleb had shown up again, all embarrassed at having shown his hand a little too much when it came to emotions.

Helga could relate.

He was rubbing the back of his head a little, small strands of hair escaping the clutches of the hair tie, and asked, “So I figured that since it was your first day here and all, I could take you down to a few places I know, show you the area, get some fresh air out-”

Helga looked at the embarrassed Chinese hipster who was now looking extremely shy, and giggled,
“Well, how about this Caleb? Phoebe and I were thinking of having a quiet dinner in tonight, but if Eugene doesn’t mind.”

“Don’t mind what, Helga?” Eugene’s voice wafted from the bathroom, where he had emerged from his steaming shower. He was wearing a fluffy white bathrobe, and towelling his red curls, which were now sticking up everywhere. He had a nice flush going on from the hot shower, which further deepened from his neck to his chest when he saw Caleb. Judging from Caleb’s own flush, he didn’t mind it too.

Phoebe was the one who managed to stop grinning and pick up the conversation thread. “Jinkxy, Helga and I were thinking that Caleb should bring you around the neighbourhood a little! You haven’t been back in ages, so you wouldn’t know how the scene has changed, and you did mention you wanted to go see the queer scene around here and get some peppermint schnapps.”

“You like peppermint schnapps?” That was Caleb, who seemed to have actually paid attention to what the two women were insinuating and was able to save himself from greater embarrassment. “I love peppermint schnapps! I know the best bartender who makes the best schnapps, if you want to go with me?”

Thank god Eugene said yes, and told Caleb so. Helga and Phoebe were very pleased.

They of course spent the rest of the afternoon helping Eugene pick a nice outfit to wear to the date. Caleb had agreed to come back in the evening to pick Eugene up, so they had a pretty good 3 hrs left to help.

It was when Eugene was trying on a white sweater and pleather pants combo with tall black boots that Helga told them about Olga’s DM.

The reaction from the both of them was rather explosive. Phoebe had yelled, “What?!”, Eugene had yelled, “That bitch, the gall to send you a DM like nothing was wrong!” and both of them went on fast rants that went on concurrently, to the point that Helga could not figure out what they were saying.

“Oh criminy, calm your selves!” she yelled. The both of them stopped and looked back at her. “It’s just Olga, we all know she’s a bitch, but I need some sound advice from the both of you, which usually means I need you two to calm down and think of suggestions of how to respond!”

The both of them did, for a few seconds. Then Eugene lowered the scarf he was holding, and said, ”Dear Olga, did you fall from Heaven? Because so did Satan. Fuck you, bye bye.” He looked at Phoebe, “Good first draft?”

Phoebe locked eyes with him. “Change ‘Olga’ to ‘Bitch’ and put in a turd emoji to go along with it.”

“Pheebs!” Helga was scandalised to hear her best friend say something like that.

They were not wrong to get angry with Olga on Helga’s behalf. When Miriam passed on, and Bob had hurled accusations of having pushed her mother into dying, Olga had sided with Big Bob. Helga had come into her room crying to Olga because of the horrible things Big Bob had said to her, which made her so angry she had burst into tears. Olga had pushed her away in her own grief, accusing Helga of stressing Miriam out so much that she drove her into it, and why couldn’t she just be nice and polite and great just like she had. Olga had only managed to see her own sacrifices and doormat
like behaviour to please her parents as the hugest contribution to her parents being together, and Helga not doing the same made her the enemy.

It was Helga’s fault that she didn’t push down her own anger and differences to be light and pretty and clean like Olga did. It was Helga’s fault that she couldn’t feel the love her parents gave her, why didn’t she see that everything her parents did was all for them? Helga was the reason for all the pain and anger in the world. Helga was the reason she didn’t get married to Derek when she was so much younger, and practically drove him away, yes, she did know about that. Helga was the reason why her mother was now lying dead in a casket 6 feet underground. Helga was not normal.

Helga packed a bag and left home that day, staying at her friend’s place until they both got to college. She didn’t hear from them for the most part, except for a few sporadic updates here and there, like Olga getting married soon afterwards, having two kids, and them moving back to Hillwood.

Phoebe raged when she heard what happened. Eugene tried to break a bottle and sic the queer mafia on Olga when Helga confided in him, bonding over the shitty experiences in their lives. Both were angry at Olga for being this shitty to Helga. And Helga had cried when she told them the story.

Now, that DM brought back a lot of memories, and Olga sending it like nothing had happened between them was callous and rather shitty for Phoebe and Eugene.

“Don’t do it, Helga!” Phoebe snapped. “From past experiences, Olga is a good for nothing white girl who pushes her own problems on other people, and never takes responsibility for any of her own actions!”

Eugene nodded. ”Gurl, Phoebe is right. Olga’s issues should not affect you at all. Fuck her lawyers, fuck her and her 2.5 children, fuck her heteronormative lifestyle. I stalked her Instagram once, that bitch votes Republican!”

It was rare that Helga was the voice of reason in any situation, and she decided that it was way too weird for this. She calmed them down, helped Eugene pick between two platform boots to go with the outfit, lent him a great kohl liner and brown eyeshadow, and waved Eugene on his way after she promised she would delete the DM and ignore Olga Pataki.

When Caleb came to pick Eugene up, the redhead walked out of the door reassured that bad shitheads would not prevail today.

Later, during dinner (It turned out Caleb had brought a bag of groceries for them, and Helga and Phoebe managed to make a simple dinner of baked mac and cheese for themselves), Phoebe asked quietly if Helga was going to delete the DM.

Helga thought about it, and quickly shook her head no.

Phoebe sighed. “I did consider that possibility. Are you going to see Olga?”

Helga didn’t reply.

Phoebe continued, “Eugene and I talk a big game, but the ultimate decision lies with you, Helga, and in the end, you are the one who decides if you have enough strength to talk to her. Just…whatever you do? Don’t let her toxic side get into you okay?”

Helga didn’t reply, but she gave Phoebe a small smile.
Helga spent the rest of the night in front of her laptop, staring at the DM icon. Even until then she wasn’t sure if she had actually made up her mind, but she tapped on the icon and started typing anyway.

When she went to bed that night, she still wasn’t sure if she had actually made the right decision.

Chapter End Notes

I like to think of Eugene as a combo between Jinkx Monsoon (which I got part of her name from), and Laganja Estranja, who is known for her dancing.

I like to think of Umbrella Girl as a cross between Alice in Wonderland, My Chemical Romance and Kaori Yuki's work.

I stole the name of Caleb from a colleague of mine. IRL Caleb is not a hipster.

I own a shirt Caleb has on.

The white, hetero-bashing thing might be uncomfortable, but I figured Eugene was more like Jinkx Monsoon in that aspect, as in Twitter she is more likely to be up and understanding in the issues. Remember, Eugene is best friends with an LGBTQ activist.

Phoebe is a tiny, half Japanese surgeon. She would be up with the issues too.

Helga...it should be noted, there's one more reason why Olga isn't happy with Helga in the funeral scene. I'll explain why later.

Nadine and Arnold are not flirting. I just want more Nadine, and figured she and Arnold could be work best friends. I should write Gerald more often.

Do people actually read these notes?
Living in the 21st century, it was rare to find someone who didn’t have a Facebook account.

Helga Pataki was one. She did once venture into the social platform when she was 19, right around the time the app was becoming a hit. Soon afterwards, she was inundated with requests to be her Friend because that was when she started doing more plays as a result of her major, and more people were starting to take notice of her. And when you were a teenager who had a childhood where everyone either basically didn’t see you, or saw you for all the wrong reasons, the attention was something that baffled her at first, and made her curious about what they saw in her. She was, in a way, also very flattered by the attention.

A lot of them did ask her out, and she did accept. There was the guy she dated who wanted Helga to be his Aryan Goddess (she only dated him once, but left during dinner when she found out more about his beliefs.) There was that girl who was an aspiring writer herself and discussed Sappho and Austen with fervent love. (They dated for around 3 weeks before Helga realised that the girl merely wanted to be associated with the It Poet of the Moment, and broke it off pretty quickly afterwards)

There was that one guy Helga had really strong feelings for, and nearly pushed herself a little too hard trying to get his attention and writing poem after poem about him. After 3 months, Helga realised he was a lot more like Big Bob Pataki in mannerisms and appearance, parading her around like a proud fisherman and his prize-winning bass. That one she did regret a lot, and made her a little angry that Bob Pataki could still affect her life even though she was already an adult. She was angry that she had routinely embarrassed herself so much for this guy, and all for nothing.

It was after 4 years of using Facebook that she decided it would be a good idea to delete her account. There were a few good reasons for that.

Firstly, Helga was getting a little tired of the app, especially with the superficiality of it all.

Secondly, her book Purple Berries and Other Things You Find at The Bottom of the Glass was published at the time, and when readers figured out that the book was about her feelings towards Miriam and her drinking, she kept getting messages.

Well-wishers kept telling her they cried over her book, angry parents telling her she had sullied the memory of the woman who brought her into her life, a few kept telling her their stories of battling alcoholism and she just couldn’t keep up. For weeks, she kept re-reading the messages and crying, or trashing her apartment, or angrily ranting on forum pages dissing herself while using the handle of a troll. Her work was suffering, and so were her friendships with Eugene and Phoebe.

Eugene had to sit her down one day in his apartment, with Phoebe on Skype to teleconference. They told her that this behaviour was not good for her, and she had to stop pushing herself too deeply into the situation. They had a very long, very angry intervention, and the end of it was Eugene consoling Helga as she sobbed after having angrily punching a mannequin he had to pieces. She promised to stop reading the messages herself.

The third reason, and it was the most compelling one for her, was so that no one like Olga could
track her down. In one of her reading binges, she did receive one from Olga which was a passive aggressive one that hinted very very lightly (read: it was very angry) that the older Pataki Sister was angry that Helga was ruining the Pataki name in front of her well to do in laws, airing their dirty laundry out like that, Mummy was dead, why did you have to do it for glory, baby Sister, where’s your family pride and honour?

That was, to be fair, the reason she has spiralled into despair, and when Helga Pataki did despair, she did it like no other.

And so it came to pass that Eugene, Phoebe and her had that intervention mentioned earlier, and it resulted in a few changes:

Helga moved in with Eugene so she could have someone to talk to when she was angry, and it helped to have social interaction with someone around.

Helga changed her number and emails, making sure only to give out her contact to people she trusted, stressing that only they could have that, and nobody else. If they had to share the contact, they were to tell Helga first, so that she could assess the situation herself.

And thirdly, Helga deleted her Facebook account. It was just getting too much just to balance Facebook and writing good work. She managed pretty well until the first book of Our Gang was published, and Frannie and the book publishers made her a Facebook page, to garner likes. She was not a fan of the idea, and had raged against the move privately to Eugene and Phoebe. She was only sold on the idea when Fran told her that she did not have to manage the page at all, or respond to any messages.

Helga grudgingly gave them permission to make a page on her behalf, and they kept to their word of managing the page without involving her at all.

It was a pretty good arrangement, honestly speaking. Helga enjoyed it.

Arnold, in a fit of curiosity, decided to look up Helga on Google again, this time with a focus on social media pages.

It turned out that while Helga did not have a Facebook profile, she did have an official Facebook page. It wasn’t anything interesting to gleam anything from. Helga clearly didn’t run it herself, it was mostly focused on upcoming events and programs that Helga had been involved with, and very impersonal.

The Twitter account and Instagram yielded different results.

Helga’s twitter account was truly, and duly herself. She was still a fan of Wrestlemania, it seemed, judging by her cover photo. She had a bunch of very weird cat gifs, and also seemed to have threads where she watched trashy reality television shows. He read one which seemed to be an episode from a show called Sex Sent Me To The ER. It made him laugh because it was genuinely funny, and the show seemed pretty ludicrous. He figured he should have a go watching it one day.

Out of all the people Helga expected to come up banging on the door Tuesday morning, her agent/manager was not one of them.

“Frannie P?” Helga asked, dumbfounded, as the slim, tall, big-haired woman stood there, poised in a
too tight colourful suit jacket and skirt, and stiletto heels as sharp as her heels, and swinging a red handbag. “I thought you were in California, why are you in Hilwood?”

Fran Pine stalked in, and it just too weird to see a little part of her Michigan life clashing with her childhood town. “Dahling” she said, in that weirdly pitched nasal voice she had, “I’m just here to make sure you get to your engagements on time and at the right places. Besides, I’m supposed to be here to represent you, remember? I had some time between the houses in Kalabasas and Manhattan, so I came over.”

Fran Pine was a self-made woman, who had, in her youth, been together with one man for many years, until he unceremoniously broke off their engagement, fired her from her bridal consultant job, and left her homeless. She started working as a nanny for a family who had three kids, and a lonely, but rich Broadway producer father, and if you were to believe Fran, the man was obviously in love with her right from the start.

They danced around each other for many years before she decided to make the first move, and they finally married and she started to market herself as an agent for talented authors and stars because she was not content to be a stay-at-home wife. With her epic style and flair, she took her job like a duck who loved the sky, the water and the worms. How she came to represent Helga Pataki, the younger blonde would never know. But she knew Fran had her interests at heart.

Fran took one look at the loft they were currently at and nodded approvingly. Then she turned around to take another look at Helga and went dead silent, “Honey, what are you wearing?”

Helga looked down at her attire: a grey racerback tank top and pyjama shorts. “They’re clothes, Frannie. I wear these to sleep and when I loiter around my living arrangements looking for food.” She looked back at Fran and frowned, “What are YOU wearing?”

Fran had taken off her suit jacket to reveal a plain white t-shirt that Helga knew her agent would never be caught dead in. The white shirt fit her frame perfectly, but that was not the point.

What was the weird part was the fact that Fran had a tee with her face on it?

“Honey, these shirts are part of your new merchandise sales!” Fran exclaimed. “I’m just here to show it off!”

Holy criminy to the seven hells.

Looking at her face emblazoned on a white shirt, Helga gave the shirt a stare. Then she turned back to Fran, who was looking at her with a certain glee in her eyes. “Frannie, dearest, darlingest book agent, WHY THE FUCK IS MY FACE ON A SHIRT?!”

Phoebe and Eugene both came out of their rooms, watching as Helga Pataki had one of her infamous rants at her book agent.

They watched it fascination as Helga railed against the absolute ludicrousness of her agent going behind her back and making decisions as big as merchandise that was supposed to represent her, and how a big face version of herself WAS NOT the way to represent herself and her brand, this was not the way an agent was supposed to represent her clients, fucking hell, and ranted about having a t shirt made in the first place, and that book merchandise was just ridiculous, but for fuck’s sake, why was her face even needed there, the focus is supposed to be on the books, and why the hell did Fran even think that was a fabulous idea, at the very least don’t put her face on the shirt, and why are shirts even a good idea, damn capitalism and damn Ayn Rand and damn Darwinism and fuck-
“Wow, she’s really on a roll here.” Eugene murmured to a pyjama-clad Phoebe, who had in the time that Helga was spending screaming her head off, made hot chocolate for Eugene and herself.

“I have to admit that it’s been ages since I have seen or heard Helga do a rant of this proportion, and it’s a rather decently sized one,” Phoebe nodded. “If I still did research on brains back in my medical school days, I would have used this opportunity just to see which part of her brain light up on the scanner. I’ve always wanted to see what makes her brain tick. “

Eugene took a sip of his mug, and he and Phoebe sat back listening to Helga still angry throwing her hands around and Fran standing there looking sort of amused. It was really soothing, strangely enough.

By the time Helga finished ranting a few minutes later, she had managed to exhaust herself, panting so hard she had to find the couch using her hands to pat and collapse against.

Fran was still standing there, looking more amused than ever. “Helga, I was joking.”

Helga stared up at her, through locks of blonde hair that had fallen in front of her face in her anger. When she finally could muster the strength to say something, all she could say was, “What” in a voice that had less strength in it and was now more raspy than actual voice.

Fran started laughing,” Haahhhheeeey, it was a joke! We made merchandise, which is why I’m here, really, but this is not one of the designs that was approved in the final stage! I wanted to surprise you, but I thought this would be a good way to introduce you to it so that the designs I’ll show you won’t look as bad as this would be!” She took out a file that did seem to have multiple shirt designs. " I’m here to get these looked at and approved, and then after lunch, we’re gonna go to the TalkBuzz offices! You need to make nice with the people there, and this means a nice interview with them, and a chance for me to network!"

There was a silence, broken only by the long, slow, audible sip from Eugene lifting his mug and drinking hard.

Helga was so exhausted that she even had to handle the ludicrousness of the entire situation, so all she did was collapse fully on the couch and laugh and cried a little.

Arnold got a text message from Gerald at around 1, telling him that he wouldn’t be back at the apartment for dinner, but he would bring back leftovers from the batch of interviews they would have to do today. Arnold nodded, and figured that perhaps tonight would be a good time to have dinner at the Sunset Arms again.

He knew he would probably be welcome at the boarding house. After Miles and Stella had returned, they had decided to stay and take over from Phil and Gertie, having decided to retire from the more active aspects of their jobs for a long while. In the meantime, there was the little pesky manner of the government. Since Stella and Miles had been missing for a good 9-10 years, there were a few places that were disputing that fact, including insurance companies. Stella and Miles had to prove that they were well and truly alive, and had been asleep thanks to the sleeping sickness.

This also meant that at points of time, Miles and Stella spent a few years out of the country to gather witnesses, translators, and find Eduardo (the real one) to fight their case. This time though, it was okay. There were more places in San Lorenzo now that had Internet, and Miles and Stella made sure to stay in a place that had access to a phone. Arnold got nightly phone calls from his parents to reassure him that they were still okay, although he still had nightmares that every trip over to San
Lorenzo would be their last again.

The calls and emails had helped, however little it did. They finally had the case settled when Arnold was 18 and had access to their social security numbers again. Miles and Stella had helped to run the boarding house with the help of Gertie and Phil, who though old were still spry for their ages. Phil had of course gone past the family curse and was still happily in love with Gertie, although he was now able to take on more fishing trips. Gertie meanwhile was still eccentric, and while she had accidentally broken a hip a few years ago, she had a whole new hip that replaced it.

This, however, meant that Arnold had for a few years done his bit to help out the Sunset Arms. He originally studied to be a Psychology major with a minor in English, and wanted to become a psychologist, but with Grandma’s ailing health, he decided to enroll in teaching college and become an English teacher, a career he knew would be faster than the years of practice and schooling he needed to be a professional practitioner. He hadn’t regretted it for a second, he always liked teaching, and wanted to be like his 4th-grade teacher that had taught him so much when he was 9.

Miles and Stella helped out too, Stella writing up her thesis on the Sleeping Sickness and presenting her findings to the university with regards to the effects the illness had on the adults and the cure. It had gone over very well. She was featured on TIME magazine and was invited to the White House and the United Nations to present and meet with the heads of authority there.

They were rewarded very handsomely for their efforts. The government had, to thank them, offered the family monetary compensation for the time they had sacrificed so much for their family and an ancient tribe from another country in South America. The United Nations began a taskforce to combat the Sleeping Sickness in Southern America, and requested that Stella and Miles lead it alongside famous doctors and health care experts from all over the world. Stella had accepted, while Miles refused. He’ve had enough adventures for a while, his family needed him, and he thought it was important for his wife to continue her work without him.

So Miles stationed himself at the boarding house, helping Phil with the day to day operations of the boarding house, hiring a team of builders along with himself to work and spruce up the place, and being the new landlord collecting rent from the boarders.

Arnold had never forgotten the joy of finally having parents, even though the San Lorenzo trip was 19 years ago. He remembered the trip rather vividly as well, with La Sombra having duped them, Helga and Gerald busting him out, going to the jungle where the Green Eyed People lived, and finally rescuing the parents when they release the medicine in the air, after having lost hope because of losing the Corazon.

Now that he thought about it, it was rather weird. After they found out that only La Corazon was able to fit into the hole to trigger the mechanism, Helga had turned rather blustery, excused herself, and went to talk to the child ruler alone. Arnold and Gerald had wanted to go with her, but Helga had glared them down and they relented, letting the ruler have an audience with the blonde angry girl, along with Eduardo as translator.

Then, soon afterwards, the child ruler had left, holding in her hands what seemed to be a golden metal heart, a locket, and presenting it to Arnold. He had looked at it in confusion ( didn't the heart look very familiar to him somehow?), but Eduardo, in his enigmatic manner, had told him to just give it a go placing it on the dais.

Arnold did as requested, and the machine worked. It woke up the adults of the ancient city, as well as his parents.
Later, he couldn’t remember much, having only eyes for his parents being alive, but he did see the princess approach Helga and passing her the locket again. Helga had at the time rolled her eyes, but accepted it, and the princess threw herself on her and hugged her tightly. Not even Helga would deny her that hug after seeing that the princess too had lost her parents for 9 years and had to rule in their stead, making adult decisions about food and leadership.

He did try to ask Helga how and why the heart was given to her but Helga got defensive and snapped at Arnold, claiming that she had merely lent it to the Princess and that the Princess was doing her a favour. When asking her what the heart was, Helga claimed loudly and swore up and down that it was a trinket she picked up on the mainland when they landed in San Lorenzo. He didn’t ask any more questions afterwards, only commenting that it was fairly lucky that it had happened, and giving her a hug for her generosity. He thought he felt her lean into the hug a bit before she got defensive again and started slapping against him to let her go.

This was a bit weird, but it was why he never thought badly of Helga when she left, even though he had heard stories of her snapping at her old classmates when they wished to say goodbye. He knew she was generous and sweet, and helped get his parents back.

He got another text message from Gerald.

*Man, Rhonda being really pretentious today, she knew Helga was coming in, so she got everything all spruced up and looking herself in the mirror and giving herself a pep talk. If you didn’t know any better, you would think it was the Queen coming in or something.*

Arnold looked at the text before returning back to his phone, where he was now currently looking at Helga’s Instagram. She had her arms around two rather well-built men, and the caption read, "Hello, boys.”

He sighed a little. Helga was living her best life with good-looking men and amazing life choices. He wished he could have something like that.

Helga was not making amazing life choices.

After a few long hours of Fran and her arguing about merchandise designs, they had left the house for the TalkBuzz offices, alongside Fran and Eugene. They had driven to a rather tall office building, and walked into the lobby with trepidation. Phoebe had gone to visit her parents and spend the day with them.

It was strange to see the place was the brainchild of someone she knew when she was young, instead of a place only people of her parents' generation could run. Then again, she was 29, and no longer could deem herself a child, so it was inevitable that someone her age would be able to run a company like this.

Eugene murmured, “I cannot believe Rhonda made this.”

Helga replied, “Hell no, neither can I.” She turned in time to see a tall brunette stalk down the lobby dressed in leggings, a tank top, and a red blazer, along with heels. She was beautifully made up, like the makeup bloggers Eugene followed religiously on his Instagram.

Right now, she had a rather predatory grin on her face, as the woman stopped in front of them, examined them all, then extended a hand, “Well? Don’t you have anything to say to Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd?”
Fran was the only person to react to that statement with anything resembling civility and warm conversation, “Ahh, you must be Rhonda! I’m Fran Pine, Helga’s agent! Ciao, darling, ciao!” She and Rhonda air-kissed each other on the cheeks.

Helga managed to get herself back in order before she spoke, “Rhonda. Good to see you.”

“As am I to see you, Helga.” simpered Rhonda before she turned to Eugene, her eyes turning wide.

“Do my eyes deceive me? Is that Eugene Horowitz? Why I thought you would have tripped over yourself and be in a wheelchair by now. She pointed down at his shoes. “Should you even be wearing those right now, or should I call the hospital on speed dial? Honestly, these are the unmanliest shoes ever, they’re meant for petite, delicate people like moi.”

Eugene, who was wearing a pair of strappy platform heels, merely looked down at her before replying, “Actually, Rhonda, you will recognise these shoes. Every shoe loving person is looking for these. But they were custom made for me…Christian is a dear friend of mine, and I helped model a few gowns for a shoot at one point.” He lifted a leg up so the three women could see the bottom soles of the shoe, a lovely shade of red. “These were expensive, you know. The last pair Louboutin ever made, I had to call in a favour with him to get them.” His face grew a little sly. “In a way, I had to walk over another client he had to get these.”

Rhonda was looking more shocked now. “The Le Merci Avec Plasir?” she shook out. “They were sold out, Mr Loubontin told me-”

Eugene smirked, “He made one last pair so that I could walk in them without breaking the heel, and funny enough, he snagged this from his last client, a R. Wellington-Lloyd. Oh, wait, isn’t that your last name, Rhonda?” he said the last line in mock surprise. “It seemed that just luckily, the client and I had the same foot size.”

Helga had to hold a laugh back for that. Eugene had a rather large shoe size, a size 14, and that was why of all the clothes she shared and borrowed, she had never borrowed shoes from him. That was a pity, he had gorgeous taste in clothes and shoes. But if that were true, that meant that Rhonda had lied about her being petite all over, and had always claimed that her shoes were always custom made to fit her delicate feet better. The fact that she wore a size 14 as well as hilarious, and clearly a blow to Rhonda who had prided herself on small, delicate features, and who compared herself to Kendall Jenner, according to Phoebe who followed her on Instagram.

With Rhonda fuming next to her, the entourage now made their way to the lifts. Eugene gave Helga a wink, Fran was trying to hide a smile and remain professional, and Helga took a deep breath as they stepped into the metal interior of the lifts.

It’s gonna be a long day.

Chapter End Notes

It’s shorter than I expected, think of this as chapter 5a.

Rhonda is mean to Eugene because she thinks men should be men, and she's aware of his career as a drag queen, which she deems as rather lowly.
Drag queens can make a lot in tips though. And Eugene is good at what he does.

Helga I see her as bi in this story.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Helga does TalkBuzz, Gerald and Helga meet, Arnold finds stuff out, and Rhonda bares her soul.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was safe to say no matter how snobbish Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd was, she did her business degree well.

Rhonda gave the three of them a long tour, and suffice to say, despite the fact that Rhonda held questionable views about gender and drag queens, she knew how to run a business. Helga had read up a little bit on TalkBuzz before the interview, and read the success story of Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd. Using part of her trust fund she received when she was 21, Rhonda had decided to spend her money on a worthy venture: a website where the latest gossip, trends, and news would come from Rhonda herself.

Naturally, it didn't work, and Rhonda recognised that. Undeterred, she took it upon herself to develop original, strong content beyond the original concept, where contributors could create articles and content meant for people to spend hours on the site. Youtube videos featuring reactions, testing out videos, creating comparison videos, Rhonda took it upon herself to find talented, multi-tasking hardworking people that could help her bring the content to life, and the result was TalkBuzz.

In it's 7th year, TalkBuzz was doing so well financially that Rhonda bought a huge building to house the staff in, delving from the video content unit, the writing unit, and others. Her marketing team was one of the strongest in the country, creating campaigns so strong it was on Twitter and Facebook for weeks. People shared TalkBuzz's videos on all the social platforms, and it made the news. Rhonda was featured on the list of, "30 under 30", and gave interviews where she was strong, tough, and just a little egoistic and flirty. But the interviewers bought it, it was all part of the leader's charm.

Helga and Eugene stood at the main offices of TalkBuzz, fascinated at the way so much of what produced the Internet’s content were all in these large, bustling office. No one wore stiff collared shirts and ironed slacks, or unflattering knee-length skirts. Most of them were dressed rather casually, ranging from jerseys to plaid shirts. There was a rather cute dark-skinned girl who had walked past Helga and Helga almost wept at how tiny, cute and compact she was. Everyone in this office was beautiful. She looked down at her black jeans and noticed the knee fraying badly, and inwardly sighed. She could never be as put together or as amazingly gorgeous as this lot. Maybe Eugene could.

Said redhead was scanning the crowd looking at the number of heads all at their desktops. The one nearest to Eugene seemed to be editing a video on what seemed to be a taste test on vodka. "Is this what it means to have a self-fulfilling job at the office where you will find leadership skills and team surgery?" He whispered to Helga.
Helga chuckled, “Synergy, you goof. That’s what all the people at offices talk about.”

“Yeah that. Either way, still not getting career satisfaction.”

A black man with gorgeous hair chose that moment to walk past them. “You sure about that, Genie?” The blonde woman nudged Eugene to look at him.

Eugene had a quick scan and his eyes rested on his gorgeous back and butt. “Well... maybe some career satisfaction.”

“Hey, it’s you two!”

Both of them turned to look at the tall black man walking towards them, a large grin stretching from ear to ear. His hair was now buzzed down shorter to his scalp, but there was no mistaking that edge of cool.

Eugene laughed and stretched his arms out to hug the taller man. “Gerald! It’s great to see you!”

“As am I, little man!” Teased Gerald, which was true, and both hugged. Though Eugene had grown taller, he was still rather short in comparison to Gerald, who had somehow shot up to a good 6 feet and maybe even a few inches more. Gerald had also bulked up a bit more in comparison to the redhead, who got wiry and lean thanks to his dancing. Both men hugged like they were close friends.

Helga stood at the edges, a little more uncomfortable with where she was, as she watched Eugene and Gerald chatter like gossiping old biddies. She had in the past never treated Gerald with more than scathing scorn, and considered him a distraction towards Arnold back in her childhood days. She knew he was more than that, and Phoebe’s stories of when they were dating told her that Gerald was honourable. Eugene had once told her about how when they were in high-school, a few kids had thrown him into the locker and it had been Gerald who got him out a few times.

Yet it was uncomfortable to be between two people who clearly got along way better than Helga ever did with any of her older friends sans Phoebe, Eugene and sometimes Patty. How did people learn to do that? She wondered. Is it all natural or did Miriam and Bob forget to tell me something? How on earth-

“Helga! Get over here!” Eugene yelled, and Helga, broken out of her thoughts, startled and walked over. Gerald was now looking over at her, a little wary, wondering how Helga would react. She was exasperated at the number of people who were too accustomed to doing that after meeting her again when a few years passed.

She decided to do the civil, polite route, and go down a casual, “Hey, How you’re doing?”, grasping his hand in a firm handshake. If there was one thing she knew she had, it was a good, strong handshake. Big Bob Pataki had drilled that into her and it was one of the few things she knew she learnt from him.

Gerald himself took that handshake and shook it, still looking at her a little warily. Then he smiled, a little nicer, “Great to see you, Helga.”

Helga relaxed. She felt that she had passed some sort of test. He turned back to his phone and said, “Okay I need to bring you to makeup first before we get you to the briefing room so we can tell you
what the interview is going to be like.” He looked up at the both of them and smiled. “Eugene, if you’re nice, you can get the makeup artists to do your eyes and cheeks. I hear Yolanda can do magic with glitter and highlighter.”

Arnold had walked into what seemed to be a very weird situation again, which meant that it was another day at the boarding house.

“Age and treachery will always beat youth and wisdom!” shouted his Grandma Gertie who seemed to have found his old skateboard and was now skating down the hallways of the boarding house, followed by a huffing and puffing Miles, chasing after her with a butterfly net.

Arnold decided to not question what was happening, because the answer would inevitably turn up at some point. Sure enough, a small piglet had emerged from their hiding place under the staircase closet, alongside two kittens and a puppy. All of them looked up at Arnold, who gave them a cursory nod, and both parties went on their separate ways, Arnold to the room where Stella made her study, and the animal party to the kitchen where Grandpa Phil was bound to have snacks ready for them away from the scary old woman and the tall blonde guy that kept falling down.

He knocked on the door to Stella’s study, heard the resounding, “Come in!” before turning the door and walking in.

Stella, on the couch, was tapping away at her laptop, working on a spreadsheet while enjoying a sandwich. She looked up to see her tall son and smiled, “Arnold! Come in, let’s talk, what’s up?”

Arnold gestured towards the sandwich, “Isn’t dinner coming up soon?”

His mother looked down at the bread, and shrugged, ”Eh, food is food.” she said through bites. "This was a lunch sandwich, so I think it should be fine.”

Arnold questioned himself silently if that kind of logic should work, but he figured that since his mom was the one with the PhD, he gave her the benefit of the doubt.

Stella clicked on a few things, saved her work, and closed her laptop, turning to look at her grown son with a soft gaze. “So, again, what can I do you for?” she asked, patting the couch.

He sat down next to her, stretching out his limbs before curling his feet up under him and sitting down, “Nothing much, really. Papers are being marked, kids are asking me questionable things, and Nadine made me pet her pet tarantula, so I figured it would be good to be around some sort of normalcy.”

This would have had more effect if they both hadn’t heard Miles yelling, “Damnit, small animals!” and a vase breaking, along with Grandma cackling like a witch.

Arnold and his mom looked at each other and laughed. Stella gave her son a playful ruffle on his hair, tutting, “It’s getting long again.”

Stella smiled, “So I heard Helga is at the TalkBuzz offices, huh?”

Arnold groaned, “Well, jeez, how did you find out about that?”

“So Gerald told Timothy, who told Nana Johanssen, who told Gertie, who told Phil, and he announced...
it to us at the dinner table on Monday.” Stella recounted.

“Wow, the gossip tree is amazing,” said Arnold.

“It is,” Stella agreed solemnly before she laughed again. “I keep forgetting old people gossip a lot. Maybe I’ll be like that one day,” She poked her son in the arm, “Get yourself married or give me grandkids, and let me see if that happens.”

“Mooooooooom” he groaned.

“Have you been dating, though, Sonny Jim?” she asked faux-sternly, taking the nickname from Gertie and folding her arms.

Arnold rolled his eyes. “Mom, I’m a teacher who spends a lot of time marking papers, or organizing school plays, or coaching school activities. Nobody wants to date someone who does that.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Stella mused. “People like hearing about nurturing men who appreciate good writing and has great organizational skills-“

“Not when the man in question has no time to spend on them,” Arnold muttered.

Stella chuckled, “What about that woman you dated last month, erm…Arlene, was it?”

“She wanted me to quit my job for something more high-paying.”

“Tonya?”

“Had to move somewhere else for work.”

“Dany?”

“Kept obsessing over her lizards.”

“Connie?”

“A bit too obsessed with Fifty Shades of Grey.”

“No!”

“Yeah ma.”

Stella thought for a bit. “Arnold, sweetheart, where are you meeting these people?”

Arnold shrugged, “I have no idea anymore.”

Stella pondered over the situation a bit more. “Have you considered dating apps?”

“I did. I met some student’s mom on it, and it got too awkward. I decided it would be best to stop using it.”

The older woman made a face. “Yeah, might be good to do that.” They both sat there for a bit, trying to figure out what else to do, before Stella brightened up, “Oh I know, Dr Gupta’s daughter is working on the task force with me, gimme your phone, I’ll pull up her Instagram to show you!”

Arnold, not wanting his mother to look at the contents of his phone, but also not willing to let his
mom fight him for it, gave the phone reluctantly over. Stella tapped the app open but saw something that made her face twist itself into a smirk.

“Hey, isn’t this the Pataki girl?“ She teased, waving the phone at her son, which was currently showing Helga Pataki’s Instagram profile.

Arnold, embarrassed, tried to steal the phone back from his mom, but Stella was faster, dodging out of the way.

“Ooh, she’s grown up very pretty, hasn’t she?” laughed Stella. “I’m not into the eyebrow piercing, but it does suit her very well.” She scrolled down the pictures some more, before her eyes grew wider and got a mischievous glint appeared in her eyes. “Oh, now THAT’S a look.” She laughed, turning the phone around to show him what she was looking at. Arnold glanced at the phone and had to agree. Helga evidently did Halloween with Eugene and his friends this year, and she was dressed in a very low cut, black, gothic style dress while wearing a black crown and holding a sceptre.

She was also being lifted by four gorgeous men on a throne. The other queen that was facing her was dressed in all white, and also, upon closer look, seemed to be Eugene, judging by the amount of highlighter and the matching white dress. He too was on a matching throne carried by men. It was captioned, “Casual look this Halloween” and had 104 Likes.

Helga looked AMAZING. Arnold had to tear his eyes away from the photo before his mom saw him.

Judging by his mom’s sniggers, he failed that part.

“You know, I’ve always wondered why you and she didn’t get together when you were younger. “Stella mused. “She did help you out, and from what I understand from Phil, she seemed to have a huge crush on you.”

Arnold’s first move was to turn towards his mother in confusion, trip over a crack on the floor, and fall down.

“Say what now.” he gasped out, lying flat on his back, all the air pushed out of his lungs, feeling like he had been punched in the stomach.

Stella was now outrightly cackling, and considering that she and her mother in law were not blood-related in any way, it sounded exactly like Gertie’s.

“Well, Phil and Gertie mentioned it when I asked about her, and it was kinda obvious to Miles and me in San Lorenzo.” She replied after finally finishing her laugh in a series of snerks. “She obviously did a lot to bust you out of the jail back then, and risking her life just for you to find us? That took a lot of guts, especially for an 11-year-old. “

“So did Gerald!” he fired back. Helga crushing on him? Never.

“Gerald did it because he cared for you as a best friend, but when he tells the story, it was Helga that convinced him and Phoebe to come up with a plan. Also, Phil and Gertie have told me a lot of stories of her suddenly appearing nearby the boarding house, or hanging out across the street, and even telling Phil how to defeat Big Bob Pataki in that Family Day thingy. She clearly cared about you a lot.”
Arnold mused over the question. His mother did have a point. It matched up to his theory of what Helga was like, secretly generous or sweet. But again, that could have plenty of explanations. Helga couldn’t have had a crush on him. There had to be a more rational explanation for that.

“Mom, stop teasing me,” he finally said.

“Oh baby boy,” that was a nickname she had given him when he was a literal baby and never stopped using. “Don’t you know who you’re talking to?”

After minutes of hearing this producer drone on and on, Helga had absolutely no idea what he was talking about.

“Okay, that’s it.” She broke out, making the guy push up his glasses in nervousness. “Gerald, no offence to your producer, but what is he talking about?”

Gerald, who was lounging about on his office chair, also seemed bored out of his skull, “Tim, I love you man, but you gotta get straight to the point otherwise guests will get confused, this has happened a few times already. Remember Priyanka Chopra? When you didn’t tell her about what she was doing properly and she didn’t pay attention to you and she nearly got bitten by that snake?”

Tim nodded sadly.

“Right, it’s okay Tim, I just need you to go and get some hot chocolate, and I’ll brief Helga on the thing, okay?” Gerald said. Tim nodded again, a little less sad, and left the room.

Now, only Helga and Gerald were left in the meeting room. Gerald sighed and collapsed back into his chair. “Sorry about Tim. He’s really amazing in the editing booth, but he’s not what you call a great talker.”

Helga nodded, brow furrowed. She was a little impatient there, but she could feel her makeup melting a little with the amount of time the producer had taken talking her ear now.

She did love her lipstick and eyeliner that the makeup artist put on her. She had never used this brand of liquid lipstick before, but damn, she really thought the dark teal worked well against her skin.

“So basically, the cameras are gonna be focused on you. We already got the questions from readers and filtered out the kinda trashy stuff, and your agent got one more look at the questions. Then we cut them out, rolled them into bits, put them in this box we have on set, and you pick them out!”

Helga thought it was a relatively simple concept. “So why did Tim bring in the word “Synergy” and “Box Office” into it?”

Gerald opened his mouth…and realised he had no answer for that. He opted for a simple shrug.

“Rhonda is showing him the closet they use for outfits,” Gerald said. “The Louboutin thing apparently impressed her? I’m still not that sure what that meant. Anyway, despite her disapproval of drag queens not being real women or something, she thinks Eugene has great taste in clothes, and wants him to pick out clothes. Or something.”
He leaned forward, “So Eugene is a drag queen, huh? And very in love with that shiny stuff.”

Helga snorted, “I’m surprised you found out, he hasn’t come back here since high school, honestly.”

Gerald nodded in agreement. “Honestly, if you didn’t tell me, I wouldn’t know. Arnold mentioned it.”

That now was a surprise. “Arnold?”

Gerald was staring at her, clearing gauging her reaction to his name. When he didn’t receive any reaction beyond that, he relaxed. “Yeah, it started because he mentioned he heard your name in class. His student was doing a project on you, and he had to look you up because you made an impression on one of his kids. He stumbled on an interview with you and Eugene then and found out Eugene was Jinkx Fortuna.”

Arnold looked her up? That was…

A warm flush had started from the bottom of her heart to her face, and it felt that her heart was being squeezed like a lightly wrung out towel.

“Well, erm. What did he think?” she asked, not sure if she was referring to Jinkx Fortuna, or herself.

Gerald replied, ”He was pretty impressed, actually. He’s ordered one of your books and borrowed another from Nadine—“

“Nadine is still here?” she blurted out.  Damn, did anyone leave this place? “I thought the hipsters took over and replaced everyone!”

Gerald burst out laughing, “Oh my god, can you say that to Rhonda? She’s somehow hired a hell load of them and she doesn’t think they are hipsters. “ he said, wiping his eyes.

“The guy whose place we’re staying at is a total hipster. “ she rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “He’s obsessed with coffee and something. He’s already asked Eugene out on a date. “

The black man whistled lowly. “Works fast.”

“Totally.” Then she remembered what she wanted to ask. “So erm. What else did Arnold say about my work?”

Gerald grinned, ”Well, I’m not sure, but he’s really taken with your poetry book, erm, not sure what it’s about… It had a giant circle on the cover—“

“Moonlight Soliloquys? “ She said faintly.

“Yeah!”

Well, that was a pleasant surprise. Not many actually cited that as their favourite book, and Moonlight Soliloquys was a collection of some of her favourite love poems, a combination of the stuff she wrote in relationships and a few she discovered from back when she was nine and re wrote, incorporating it into a few other pieces to make it more mature.

She had to admit, it was nice that people she knew read her work, especially one of the first few people that acted as her muse for her poetry since she was young, and had been in love with for a long period of time. It gave her a sense of accomplishment.
Gerald’s phone buzzed, and he took a look at the screen. “Well, Helga, the set is ready for you. Shall we?”

The interview was…nice.

Gerald told her to react as naturally as she could, and react to the questions as she would. It was, of course, great if she didn’t swear, but other than they, they would be able to edit it so that they could get it the stuff they needed.

When they started filming, and they let her start off by addressing the camera, she was a little nervous and flubbed her lines. But they kindly let her retake the shot, and, summoning her inner confidence, she smiled charmingly at the camera and began.

“Hi, I’m Helga Pataki, and today I will be answering questions that readers have sent into TalkBuzz here on camera!”

That’s all she remembered. There were a few retakes and a few re-shoots because of a wonky lighting, but she did her questions without many interruptions, and before long Gerald called for the video to cut and he turned to her smiling, “Helga Pataki, that was amazing!”

He turned back to the camera crew and went, “Guys, we got what we needed! We should be done after this!”

Helga grinned, and turned excitedly to look at Eugene and Rhonda, who was behind the cameras on set. Eugene gave her two thumbs up to match her glee, while Rhonda merely nodded in approval.

Fran had rushed out from the side of the set. “Bay-by that was amazing!” she gushed. “I couldn’t believe the chutzpah you had to be so natural on camera, it was almost like watching me!”

Fascinated by the complete chutzpah her agent had to be so shameless, Helga patted her on the back and asked where the refreshments table was.

Rhonda sashayed over to the blonde girl at the refreshments table, who was gulping down what seemed to be 5 different types of meat drizzled with fruits tarts and fried rice.

“I must say, Rhonda,” Helga said between bites. “Your food providers are delicious, and when they serve, they serve!”

Rhonda looked like she was wincing at Helga talking with her mouth opened, but she smiled nevertheless. “Not a problem!” she said, standing awkwardly.

Helga continued to eat while Rhonda stood awkwardly. The blonde wondered exactly what would go first, Rhonda’s heel breaking from tapping the stiletto against the ground in an agitated manner, or Helga’s own patience. Luckily, Rhonda broke first.

“I loved your work!” she said. Helga slowed down on eating her pastrami.

“Say what now?” Helga replied dumbly.
Now that Rhonda had stopped grinding the heel against the floor, she seemed to be on a roll.

“I loved Umbrella Girl, and I really really loved Purple Berries, and I loved Moonlight Soliloquys, and I even bought a few books from Our Gang!” Helga could barely prepare herself for this rant onslaught Rhonda was currently on. “I mean, how is it possible? You write with so many emotions! I cried when I read I Owe You Love Songs, and Raul had to check and see if I was having a heart attack or something because apparently, I never had any emotions until I read your work!” Rhonda was now yelling. Helga was wondering if she was genuinely a fan of her work or angry that she liked it.

“How the fuck dare you write such beautiful poetry! I have a copy of A Can of Beans now in my office! Do you know how hard it is to explain why I love poetry with such an unglamorous name?” she was wailing.

Helga waited for her to continue, and when she realised that Rhonda had stopped, had to figure out slowly what to do. She settled for patting her awkwardly on the back while Rhonda had now grabbed her into a hug and started crying over her shoulder, trying to figure a way to put her plate down without disturbing either the crying Rhonda or the gravy on her plate.

Eugene and Gerald were gesturing in confusion behind her. She gave them a look of, "How the fuck do I know?!" with hands in the universal signal for, "Fucking Hell, Help Me!"

“Don’t ever write such beautiful work again!” Rhonda sobbed into her jacket.

“You know I can’t actually guarantee that, right?” Helga tried to say. She then decided to just keep petting the sobbing woman as she hugged her, and promised her a hardcover copy of some of her poetry books, all signed.

Chapter End Notes

Rhonda is not evil, just woefully misguided and genuinely likes Helga's work.

Arnold is slowly working things out.

Stella and Arnold need more sensible bonding time. I don't know anything about Stella!

I want love for the mom!

This chapter really could be better.

Next will be the book signing chapter! What will happen next?
Dinner that night at the Shortmans was excruciating.

For one thing, after that fun talk with his mom, he caught his mom and grandpa sniggering their heads off when they were all seated around the dinner table, giving him furtive looks.

Miles was confused at first, but then he followed Stella’s gaze towards their son, interrogated her and his father in a fury of whispers, and when they were done, he’d burst out laughing, only to catch the glare his son was now giving him and abruptly started coughing and pretending to choke on a pea.

Arnold was not fazed. Oooooooh, he would show them all when he would see Helga at the book signing tomorrow. He would be courteous, he would be calm, he would not mention anything about reading about Miriam passing away, and above all he would not mention that the goth look suited her and those heels were amazing, please step on me wait what.

He managed to calm himself down with the rational reasoning of, “Hey, she’s only showing this through her work and her social media page. It could all be an act. Maybe IRL Helga was nice, but not as interesting as the Internet and her work was making her out to be.”

Yeah. That was a pretty good one. He could live with that. All that conjecture about Helga? All could be easily explained! Helga was an adult, so was he, they could be normal interactive adults without being embarrassing!
Also, so what if Helga had a crush on him! It had been 18 years since they last saw each other! It was meaningless! Time’s arrow neither stood still nor reverse or something to that jazz! They were practically gonna say hi to each other all anew, like they were strangers! It was all good! It was all cool!

A little too cool. He turned around to realise that he had opened the fridge for way too long and hadn’t closed it yet.

He sheepishly did it, but not without a surge of confidence, and left the kitchen.

Everything was rational and good again!

Helga had managed to extricate herself from Rhonda’s sobbing hug after letting her cry on her shoulder for the past 10 minutes ( “Okay, Rhonda, you gotta stop crying, it’s getting a little weird now.” “Wait, I have to tell you how much I love the worldbuilding in Umbrella Girl!” “Rhonda, please stop crying, I think your mascara is on my jacket now.” ), and was now looking for Gerald and Eugene, who had disappeared a while ago.

She could send Eugene a text…but her phone was currently with Fran, who had gone off to fix her makeup or something.

So, Helga had to make her way back to Rhonda, who had finally stopped crying, and was dabbing her eyes to fix what little makeup she had left. Rhonda looked back up to see Helga, and, after a couple of sniffs, looked back at Helga a little haughtily and went, “The lipstick doesn’t wash you out at all. I thought it would.”

“Nice backhanded compliment, Princess.”Helga drawled, “Seriously though, can you help me get back to the main office? I need my phone to get it back from Eugene and I think we need to exchange contact details if you want those books signed. Besides, I really wanna see your copy of A Can of Beans.”

Rhonda brightened up.

A Can of Beans was one of Helga’s older pieces, about a short, very strong crush she had had on one of her cast mates who had played her daughter in a drama piece. It came from them having a short argument about carrying groceries in a scene and her bag ripping, dropping all the groceries, but the can of beans was the only one that kept rolling away even after she had dropped them. It was a fairly simple concept, and honestly, that piece was unlike her other pieces because she had been experimenting with another form that time. But Rhonda had apparently liked it to the point where she cried over it or something. It had to mean something to her.

As she and Rhonda got out of the set, chatting amicably about Helga’s upcoming schedule for the next few days in Hillwood, Helga relaxed a little more. She and Rhonda had never gotten along when they were kids, and Helga’s abrasive nature, combined with Rhonda’s disdain for anything vulgar and ugly, meant that they were incompatible working together. Their stubbornness to refuse to listen to each other meant they were often at loggerheads. Now, here they were, being civil. It was a good sign. Well, at the moment, Rhonda was telling Helga about her lovely weekend away with Raul on a yacht which was getting kinda pretentious for Helga, but meh, it wasn’t as if Rhonda was her great friend or anything, she could tolerate some sort of small talk.

They got back to the main area, where they spotted Eugene and Gerald, and walked over. They were currently crowding over what seemed to be Gerald’s desk, judging by the poster of Golden State Warrior Stephen Curry, and a Black Lives Matter sticker on his laptop. It was also covered with
Tupperware filled to the brim with food.

Seeing Rhonda and Helga approaching, Gerald tried to hide the boxes, but Rhonda waved a hand, “Gerald, it’s fine. I’ve known you’ve been taking food from the leftovers we have left, and honestly, I don’t care. It would have been given to the cleaners and even then it would still have extras.”

Gerald waved a hand in embarrassment, but Rhonda smiled. “Gerald, you’re one of my better producers. Take the food.” To Helga, she said, “I’ll be in my office, come in later to look at my books.”

And with that, she waved herself off.

“Never thought I would see Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd cry over literature.” Eugene broke the stunned silence in disbelief.

Gerald snorted, “She’s been obsessed over Umbrella Girl for ages. She’s been talking about it for ages. She once held a meeting to discuss doing a video about the fashion choices of literary characters, and everything was from Umbrella Girl.”

Helga was starting to feel a little embarrassed at having accidentally turned someone she knew into an obsessive fan of her own work. It was beginning to feel like egoism. She was going to have to move to another country if that kept happening. Eugene and Phoebe had always told her that her work was good, but they could have been saying that just because they were good friends of hers. The reviews said that her work was pretty good, but it could have been a fluke. What did people know anyway?

She pulled herself out of that funk when Fran ran up.

“Helga, your phone has been buzzing when I was in the bathroom, you better have a check and see what’s happening.” Fran said, passing Helga her phone. “I have to go and make a few calls, but you were amazing, I’ll meet you when you’re done so we’ll get back and discuss the signing tomorrow, okay?”

Helga had opened up her phone to see her notifications, and she had gone silent.

“Helga?” Fran repeated again. That got Helga out of her thoughts.

“Oh, yeah sure sure, Frannie P.” Helga said, waving her off. Eugene looked concerned as Fran left.


She didn’t reply at first. Then she went, “Yeah.” Voice getting stronger now. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. It’s all good.” She turned back to Gerald and smiled. “So, whatcha bringing back?”

It was only when they got back to the loft and Fran had finished running through a long, complicated plan that Helga told Eugene what happened.

Eugene, naturally, hit the roof.

“You talked to Olga F. Pataki? You replied to that hot mess? “ He yelled, tossing his strappy heels aside because he had fallen down a few times when angry and did not want to ruin these pair of heels.

Helga winced, but she squared her jaw.
“She wants to meet tomorrow, for lunch.” She said.

“Tomorrow!” Eugene repeated. “You are going to talk to Olga Pataki about legal matters and act like you two parted on simple terms when you know for a fact part of the reason she refused to talk to you was because she found you kissing Nilanjana Sikdar when she was comforting you during the funeral!”

“She’s doing it because of lawyer’s matters. “Helga replied. “She wants to settle wills and what not. Trevor is apparently making a campaign to run for Mayor of Hillwood or something, and her lawyers recommended they do this to settle their family’s legacy. It’s all business, I swear. I made Olga promise we do this business-like. She promises not to bring up mom, I promise not to make fun of her husband and his Republican aesthetic, and we promised we won’t attack the kids. We’ll settle it out, I agree to get the house china or something, and BLAM-O. We don’t have to talk anymore.”

Eugene wanted to argue some more but Helga continued, “It’s been a few years, and I’ve got it figured out. It’s only brunch. Olga and I will meet in public, there will be witnesses, Olga won’t even dare make a scene since her husband is going to announce it. I’ll just listen to what she says, and if I don’t agree, I’ll leave. I promise.”

Eugene scrutinized her for a very long time. Then his shoulders drooped and he ran a hand across his red curls. “Fucking hell, Hell-Girl.”

“That’s what I do, Genie.” she smiled, eyes getting watery. Eugene always had her back.

“Eurgh, fine, Hell-Girl. But on two conditions.” Eugene held up a sharply manicured finger. “One: I’ll sit in a nearby table and be your moral support. And so will Pheebs.”

Helga started to protest but Eugene waved it off. “Nope, you get very emotional when Olga is involved, be it angry yelling and flipping tables, or crying and punching my poor mannequins. If you repress it, it would get worse. We’ll be there, and you’ll have backup.”

Helga pursed her lips over this but nodded.

“And two,” Eugene raised another finger. “You and I are going for drinks. You’re buying. Right now. We’ll call Pheebs to see if she will join us, and update her on the news. And I will require 2 apple ciders and more schnapps. I’ll dish all about Caleb, and we will have a fun time out. Olga Pataki is the devil, but the devil can wait till morning.”

Arnold woke up the next morning, feeling like death.

He rolled over to switch off his phone alarm, and went to check on his phone, which had two messages.

The first was from his mom, who sent a message saying, “Seriously, boy, think about it. Make me a proud mama.”

That was excruciatingly embarrassing, so he ignored that.

The next was from Nadine, which read, “BRING MY BOOK SO WE CAN GET IT SIGNED, I SWEAR TO GOD SHORTMAN IF YOU DON’T I WILL BURN YOUR HOUSE TO THE GROUND. Also jk but really.”

That was…kinda frightening, but okay.
He wondered if Helga would sign *Moonlit Soliloquys*. He wondered if he could get all his books signed.

He rolled his eyes at himself and decided to bring it, just in case. It made beautiful reading on the bus.

He shuffled out of his room just in time to see Gerald up and about. That was rare. Gerald usually slept till 9 and it was 8 am right now, he rarely saw him around for breakfast.

“Hey man,” he said, rubbing a bleary eye. “How was yesterday? Why are you up this early?”

Gerald waved a spatula. “Eh, woke up early, decided to make bacon and omelettes.”

Arnold nodded, shuffling towards the coffee pot with a little more life. “How were the interviews?”

He mumbled.

Gerald shrugged, “Eh, same old. Tim scared himself out of three guests yesterday, and Helga told him to explain himself clearer, but he got scared and went to eat all the crackers in the office.”

Arnold chuckled, “Poor Tim. He tries his best.”

“Mhmm.” Gerald hummed. “Also, Helga is a fucking natural at the camera, I think it might be all the media training authors had to go through or something, she did hers easily, and we wrapped pretty quickly.” He pointed a spatula at Arnold. “She’s changed, man. Changed.”

“In what way?” Arnold asked, hoping against all hope he meant for the worse, but he knew he would be disappointed in that aspect.

“She’s all... chill.” the tall black man replied. “She didn’t try and be mean, she didn’t go up and say hi, just waited until Eugene invited her over, and then said Hi, all cool. She didn’t even react badly when she heard your name, and you know how she used to yell and be defensive when she heard your name and stuff! She was totally unchilled last time. Now...” he pondered over what the best way to explain Helga now would be. “I think it would be safe to say that Helga Pataki is a very interesting person to talk to.” He laughed. “You know, it’s funny.”

Arnold raised an eyebrow. “What is?”

Gerald started unsticking the eggs from the pan. “It’s so weird, but I used to think there was a possibility Helga had a crush on you!”

Arnold stared at Gerald.

Gerald looked back.

Gerald then threw back his head and laughed.

“I know, I know! It’s ludicrous as hell! I don’t think that really happened man!”

Arnold smiled, reassured that at least one person thought Helga crushing on him was a silly idea.

Helga, nursing a dehydration headache, grumpily stalked to the restaurant front that she and Olga were meeting for brunch.
Eugene and Phoebe had gone ahead earlier to scope out the site. According to Phoebe, it was a rather classy but casual affair, and it seemed to be a place where rich women met up for brunch. According to Eugene, they seemed to serve excellent tea. According to both of them, Olga had already arrived and was waiting at a table with an empty chair.

Helga looked at the last message on her phone and squared her shoulders. Olga always seemed to bring the worst out of her. She was determined not to let her childhood insecurities and anger at Olga take control of today.

She took a deep breath, threw her shoulders back, and walked in.

Olga could be spotted immediately. She had grown her hair out, curled a little around her shoulders, wearing a simple diamond solitaire on her neck and a ring that Helga knew cost way more than needed. She was dressed in cream, floral prints the only contrast, and she kept her makeup bare and natural, only mascara and chapstick. With her downcast eyes, lashes fluttering as she drank her tea from her teacup, Olga looked like any rich, blonde 39-year-old housewife. She also looked a lot like Miriam Pataki when she was still alive.

Olga had spotted her as Helga walked in and looked at the other blonde with trepidation and hesitation.

"Why hello, baby sister..." She trailed off when she took a proper look at what Helga was wearing.
"That's... an interesting outfit!" She continued a little weakly.

Helga raised an eyebrow behind her shades. Always with a flair for the dramatic, she had decided to go badass in the hope it would give her some courage. Leather jacket, black Children of Bodom t-shirt, black pencil skirt and higher boots instead of her usual docs, as well as eyeliner and dark lipstick, she looked completely different from Olga, as it was the whole purpose. She also carried her locked away in her pocket, because something about 9-year-old Arnold Shortman gave her courage to talk to Olga rationally. At least, she was hoping it did.

She removed the shades to look at Olga directly in her blue eyes, eyes they both knew came from their Mother. “Hello, Olga,” she said in an even tone.

Two Pataki sisters in the same room after 13 years. Someone call the newspapers.

Arnold walked into the staff room with a sigh, only to be accosted by Nadine Jones.

“Did you bring my book, Arnold?” She asked,” cause I want to get it signed and -" 

Arnold produced the book out of the satchel he carried to work. Nadine was thrilled, in the same way Arnold recognised when she brought her pet tarantula to work, the time she read that an insect previously thought extinct was now thriving in Guatemala, and when she read that Chris Evans would still be in the Marvel Movies.

Arnold left her to her squealing, went to his desk, grabbed the worksheets that he knew the class would have to do today and walked to class, feeling confident that nothing wrong would happen today.

It felt like anything could go wrong at this point, at least according to Eugene and Phoebe.

Both of them were sitting across from Helga and Olga, shielded by plants so Olga and Helga couldn’t see them checking up on Helga every few minutes. A waiter had come in to serve up food
but both of them waved at him to put it down and leave quickly so they wouldn’t get distracted.

“Honestly I didn’t think Helga was going to agree.” Eugene said. “I mean, I like to think of the best of our girl, but I don’t like Olga.”

Phoebe nodded,” Olga has a tendency to make every situation seem like it’s all about her, and it can be so shitty on Helga. She sometimes claims she’s concerned about Helga but I’ve estimated only 35% of that actually happening. Olga is so self-absorbed it’s kinda scary.”

“ And the large age gap couldn’t have been a good thing either.” Eugene sighed, putting down his cup.

They both watched Olga looking down at her clutch, and taking something out.

“ What’s that?” Phoebe asked.

“ Can’t tell, looks really shiny though.” Eugene murmured.

Helga looked stunned.

“ Mommy wanted you to have this.” Olga said, looking down at her lap.

Helga looked at the medal. It was a rather cheap metal, and the gold shine of it had faded rapidly, but it was a medal which had a bull rider being flung around.

“ That’s the thing mom and I won when we got lost and lost all our money,” Helga whispered. “I thought she lost it,”

Olga raised her eyes tiredly, “She kept it in the shelf of her room. When she- passed, and you left, we found it there under some empty bottles. We only figured out that she won it with you when we found the date of the medal and asked who and when it was won.”

Helga didn’t say anything to that. Olga continued.

“ Little Sister, I don’t agree with some of your choices, neither do I agree with what you did with that girl at the funeral.“ Helga opened her mouth to harshly correct Olga but a shift made her feel the metal locket in her jacket pocket and she settled. “But I have always loved you, and I want you to know that. Daddy misses you too, he wanted me to tell you.”

Helga silently thought that if Big Bob wanted to tell her something, then it would be amazing if he didn’t send his daughter to be his lackey, but sure. This was fine.

Olga continued,” With regards to the will-“here she took out a USB drive. “Everything is in here; Trevor and I agreed on it. I want you to look at it and I want you to tell me what you think. Give me your answer in a month’s time. It doesn’t have to be now, but it makes sense. Just have a look, and ask me any questions later, “she got up from her seat, smiling at Helga. “It was great seeing you again, baby Sister.” And she left, leaving only her perfume behind.

Helga sat there, watching her go, while Eugene and Phoebe rushed over to her side. “What did she say?” Eugene asked. “Is she dying? Is that why they have wills?!”

“Did you agree to anything?” That was Phoebe urging her. “Talk to us, Helga!”

Helga held up the small USB drive and said, “My sister’s will is in here and she wants me to see it.”
The three of them looked at the USB Helga had in her hands.

Then Helga made a small growl. “Criminy, she invited me for brunch and yet ordered fucking nothing before she left. Now I’m hungry and need to stress eat. Waiter!” she barked. “Get us three mimosas and your cheese and mushroom omelettes- wait sorry, 2 cheese and mushroom omelettes, and one mushroom and ham,” she corrected, as Eugene nodded approvingly. Even in her anger, she could still remember he was lactose intolerant. “And, if possible, sweet potato fries. Fucking hell, I could eat a dragon now.”

Arnold finished school at 3.30, and spent a good hour marking papers, despite Nadine calling him a goody-two-shoes. He marked all the English essays in class, stamped them with the respective stamps, ate a light snack, and even managed to organize the next school play for the 4th-grade class before he was ready to go.

At this point, Nadine, who had been waiting impatiently for him, told him he was an idiot and dragged him over to her car. “Nadine, did you finish your papers yet?” He asked, curiously wondering how Nadine managed to finish up her marking in time.

“Did it all during my lunch break.” Nadine said. “They were easy. My kids are great with Science. Like, some of them are kinda silly, can you believe they thought guys had uteruses too? But ultimately, I have them whipped into shape, and they’re all learning about things.”

Arnold could see that. They arrived at the carpark, and Arnold took the passenger seat while Nadine drove.

When they reached the comic book store, there was already a small queue, mostly teenagers, university students and small kids with their parents all waiting in line. They looked like the only adults there for now, but Arnold reasoned that they could be coming in later. He spotted his student, Jayden, in the queue who gave him a wave, and he waved back. They joined the queue, and just in time too, as after them, more people joined the queue. They had a good 20 minutes before they would start letting people into the store for the session, and as Arnold watch Nadine bounce giddily up and down, he was very confident that nothing would go wrong today.

Helga, Eugene, and Phoebe all sat around the table, staring at the USB sitting on the coffee table in the loft.

“Could we look at it now?” Eugene asked tentatively.

“No.” That was Phoebe. “I would recommend Helga only read this document in the presence of a lawyer to see if this is all legal.”

“I still think she should have a peek,” said Eugene. “At least have an idea what Olga is doing. It could be something shady for all we know.”

Helga finally spoke. “Guys. I think Phoebe’s right.” she took the USB and stowed it away in her pocket. “I’ll only look through this in the presence of my lawyer. I think Stan could look at this with a way better eye than I can.” She looked at the both of them. “In the meantime, can you help me prep for the signing before Fran comes and gets us? We have a good one hour to go.”

They reached the place in time with a good 10 minutes to spare at the back of the comic book store,
where Fran ushered them into the back stock room to meet with the proprietor.

The man turned out to be the same guy who used to sell them comic books when they were kids. He gave them all friendly slaps on the back, and to Helga he opened his arms, “Helga, my dear. I read your work. Thank you for being this town’s best comic writer. I think my eyes nearly cried when I saw the art. Who knew you could write?”

Helga brushed the compliments aside but gave him a hug.

Fran took the time to survey the audience outside, “There’s a big crowd, honey! They’re all waiting for you, and there are even little mini Lailas out there!”

Helga was shocked, “No way.” She peeked out, and Fran was right. “Criminy fuckwits. They like my work?”

Phoebe rolled her eyes, and Eugene laughed.

Fran also whistled, and a stockboy passed her an envelope. “I wanted to surprise you, honey, but look!” She opened the big paper envelope and took out a slim novel. “It's Book 2!”

“NO FUCKING WAY!” Helga screeched, turning over quickly to grab the book. Fran was right. It was *Umbrella Girl* Vol.2. “HOW DID YOU-?”

“Darling, I work miracles.”

It was beautiful. She didn’t think she would ever say this about another book, but she had to. Sana did amazing work, and elevated her writing into something a little more than beauty. It was like looking into the face of a newborn child.

”Oh cripes,” she whispered.

“Nope!” That was Eugene. ‘Don’t you dare start crying! You worked hard on that eyeshadow, and I am not redoing that mess!”

Helga held it in together. She smoothed her skirts. She took a big gulp of water from Phoebe’s hand and swallowed. She felt more in control now.

”I’m good, I’m good,” she said, calmly.

She was more than fucking good. She felt like she was on fire. She faced one of her biggest fears today, and she now held and cradled her newest baby childbook. What else could she do but face bullets and other deadly activities?

Arnold and Nadine stood up at the corner of the store, where most of the seats had been taken up by the children and the teenagers. The press had even arrived, one holding a video camera and prepping for the stage area set up, where Helga was meant to sit during the event. The two of them had a great corner where they could see the stage, and yet not make it totally obvious that they were there. It was a great space.

Nadine bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. “This is the best day of my life!”

Arnold rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Even better than the day you met Oscar?”
Nadine stopped to consider that fact. “Yeah, I supposed meeting Oscar is up there.”

“I can’t believe you ranked it higher than meeting your partner.”

“Oscar is a delicate soul!”

“He’s also a tarantula, Nadine.”

Their bickering was interrupting when the emcee, the old proprietor of the shop, stepped up to the stage, and grabbed a mike.

The man thanked them for their enthusiasm and for their dedication to the store even after so many years. He made a short speech about how much he loved graphic novels, and how much he loved stories, so when he read Umbrella Girl, and saw that it was written by someone he used to know, he knew he had to call her in to do one book signing. The woman who wrote the books is as lovely as the art and words, and it was his ultimate pleasure to introduce Ms Helga Pataki, writer of the Umbrella Girl books as well as others!

All of them cheered raucously and for a moment, Arnold nearly couldn’t hear what was happening next.

Then his ears started roaring as finally, FINALLY, Helga G Pataki took up the stage.

She was dressed like a steampunk era writer. Her white blouse was in a v-collar, showing a nice amount of collarbone and skin. She wore a fabulous top hat decorated with gears. Her skirts were pinstriped but with petticoats. Her ombre hair was in a braid, braided with copper wire.

Helga G Pataki was nothing but RADIANT.

His heart was about to twang itself out of his chest.

And it was at that point that Arnold lost his balance and fell down against a bookshelf, causing a few books to fall on his head.

Yeah, he was wrong. Everything was probably about to go wrong for him.

Chapter End Notes

a cliffhanger? why Ru, never!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

It's shorter than expected, but this was a good resting stop for the day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Helga stood on stage and waiting patiently as the emcee finished up the final question, and thanked the fans for coming in.

She had to admit, it was a pretty decent session. She thought the outfit would be a little too much for the occasion but then she figured that it worked, and it didn’t matter if she was being a little extra, other sci-fi authors would have gone all the way for that.

Besides, Fran reassured her, the pictures for the signing would be amazing.

She took a bow as the applause roared, and heaved a sigh of relief as it died down and everyone started organizing themselves in line. Eugene and Phoebe squeezed in from the sides, Eugene handing her blotting paper to blot her face with, and Phoebe who handed her a bottle of sports drink and her favourite ink pens to sign books with. Helga took them all gratefully.

“That was good Helga! “whispered Phoebe excitedly. “I think you answered the questions suitably without any rambling whatsoever... except maybe next time you gotta stop talking about pork rinds so much.”

“Definitely!” Eugene agreed. “Also lots of people here getting autographs and lots of people are at the cashier! You’re doing amazing!”

Helga fanned herself, feeling a little hot in the outfit. It was a rather cool day but it was a rather small shop, and the place was rather crowded. Plus, her leather half corset was annoying her. “Eugene, how on earth can you wear cinchers for drag?” She hissed. “While still dancing?!”

“I don’t wear them to dance most days, Hell-Girl,” Eugene said. “I stay naturally thin through a healthy diet and amazing snacks. Shouldn’t you be okay, I know you’re doing the gym when you’re free.”

The corset was still making her uncomfortable, but it was a little more tolerable now that she got a chance to sit. She could breathe a little better now.

“I’m fine, I’m good.” She repeated to herself like a mantra. She could handle this.

“I don’t wear them to dance most days, Hell-Girl,” the proprietor of the store boomed, “I am letting you know that you can shop here, 50% off, anytime! You’re bringing business back into my store!”

Helga thanked him, but she was mostly relieved that the hard part was over.

“I’m mostly relieved the hard part is over,” she said out loud. “I thought the beginning was rather shaky, and I nearly tripped over a wire coming in- oh that reminds me, did anyone find out what that
weird thump was at the beginning? “

The proprietor nodded, “Yeah, some guy with his friend accidentally fell over or something. He hit a shelf but don’t worry, I’ve checked. The comics are fine.” He paused for a bit, then added, “Yeah, the guy that fell over is fine too. He’s somewhere at the back with his lady friend.”

Helga nodded, reassured. It would be terrible if people actually did get hurt because of an event of hers.

“So, most of these people are getting in line, and some others are making their purchases so they can get in line, so you get another 10 minutes before you start signing books, and it should hopefully take …an hour or two. Chat with the people, say hi, but try to encourage them to ask any questions after the event is over, so everyone can get their work signed. Maybe limit it to one, preferably just copies of Umbrella Girl, but there are some kids who brought Our Gang books, so if you don’t mind signing them-“

Helga nodded again. Pretty standard, considering. It was a simple mechanism, be nice, chat, say your thank yous and great days, and next. She didn’t see anyone she knew so far in the crowd, but it had been rather busy, and Helga was so into her zone when talking to the audience she registered them as a blur rather than actually recognised anyone individually. And even if she did recognise anyone on the home turf, professional face on, smile and thank them and leave.

It could go okay. What could possibly go wrong?

After Arnold managed to get back up from his sudden fall, to which Nadine had helped to pick him up and give him a look of concern, he stood there for the 45 min duration of the event, listening to everything in a little bit of a.daze. He was even more impressed after the event was over.

Helga told them the story of how she came up with Umbrella Girl (She was inspired by gothic manga from Kaori Yuki, broken fairytales, and My Chemical Romance, which was tied in with a story that she had been grappling with for a bit since she was around 12), the hard work trying to get the work out to a decent company that liked her writing, (Image comics, in the end, agreed to give her a chance to pitch, and she did and they liked it),and her collaboration with Sana Takeda (Sana Takeda was a quiet Japanese woman whose work Helga had seen from her work on Ms Marvel, and Helga wanted to work with someone who managed to incorporate the manga-esque style she wanted for Umbrella Girl. It was apparently a very loud meeting when Helga found out Sana would be doing the art, and she may have cried and made Sana take all her pork rinds. Sana politely took some, but then told Helga that there were better ones in a little shop she knew, and they spent the rest of the afternoon browsing for food at the Asian grocery store. They became friendly since).

She and Sana knew that they wanted more feminism in art, and Helga had been a little annoyed with the conventional storylines in graphic novels about adventures, so she wanted a story that dealt with trauma, looking into recovery, and reclaiming their identities after important events, all while dealing with the warrior girl trope and getting more work in. And the result was Umbrella Girl.

She then fielded a few questions where it ranged from her favourite fantasy books she was currently reading (Karen Memory, Red Seas Under Red Skies, and The Grace of Kings), her favourite makeup place,( she bought most of her lipsticks from a website but recently she had tried a liquid lip that was amazing and she was willing to try more from that site) to her commentary on the problems regarding the comic industry (Sexism was a definite problem, nerds had to stop being gatekeepers if they wanted to be taken seriously, that whitewashing editor who pretended to be a Japanese man was
absolute rubbish, and she hoped they would take advice from creators seriously.)

At some point, she was asked if there was a difference between writing for comics and writing for prose, and Helga went on a very long spiel about how graphic novels were a lot harder, and Sana and her spent a whole week in her apartment figuring out how to train Helga to think like a graphic novel writer, where she had to figure out how everything looked on a page and page reveals and translating text into just pictures, which was something she never considered before. She wasn’t as good as she thought she would be, but Sana was kind enough to help her, and she had another writer helping her out, and the three of them spent that time working, eating pork rinds and junk food, and making art.

Arnold was duly impressed as she started talking about the importance of treating people with respect no matter what, but paused before she corrected herself. “Did I say all people? Damn, I’m wrong. Treat all people with respect, but if they start treating others with disrespect, don’t do it. Punch them in the face if you have to. Like that Nazi guy. He’s evil, and I will tell you I laughed and laughed so hard when I watched that video. In my childhood days when I was into punching people, I would have done that.”

The crowd laughed. And then the entire thing winded down and she thanked them so much for being the reason why she wrote stories, and that she would be willing to sign their books if they told her about their favourite umbrellas in less than 5 words. She was kidding, but if you could do it, that would still be amazing.

And with that, she smiled, and let the proprietor take over for her.

Arnold wasn’t very sure about this, but he was convinced that he may have had a little bit of a crush on Helga.

Which he was very willing to quash.

Arnold was not a man who encouraged emotional quashing. He had often told his friends that it made no sense to deny your feelings, and that you should never deny yourself the things you like. However, there were a few reasons why he had to do this:

1) What was his crush based on? Was it an actual crush? Could it have been influenced by the teasing of his family? He needed time to figure this out for now.

2) What was the point of having a crush on someone that you clearly haven’t seen for 17, near 18 years? Helga was different from her childhood self, and she clearly looked happier. Why would he assume that it would be like in the past?

3) He could not let Helga see that he might just have a thing for her. Again, he hadn’t seen her for years, and he didn’t want to creep her out just because she was living her best life and looking amazing because of it. Helga had finally embraced herself in intelligence and letting her passion show, it was kinda silly to do so just because he had formulated an idea of her personality and her life from reading her work and watching her social media pages.

So, Arnold quashed it. He would be nice and polite and tell Helga her work was great. That was all. He picked up a copy of Umbrella Girl Book 2, displayed next to Volume 1 (he got both copies), and flipped through book 2, enjoying the art and the panels. It was beautiful work as usual, and he hoped
he had time to read through book two before they reached the cashier. Nadine was bouncing next to him in line, excited and impatient, cradling her own book. “Oh god, which one should I get her to sign? Book 1? Book 2?” she said, all excited and jumpy, and ignoring Arnold’s own turmoil.

“I don’t know, Nadine.” he replied absentmindedly, as they edged slowly towards the counter. “I just don’t know.”

Helga had already chatted with what seemed to be 100 fans, and she was slowly feeling drained and a tiny bit cranky.

This was a horrible idea. She was dressed way more than needed, her wrist was getting achey, she felt that she was about to sweat out of her corset, and this guy was currently droning on about how the world building of Umbrella Girl reminded him so much of the Ottoman Empire, and how Helga should consider adding more Japanese symbolism in upcoming issues. She wasn’t sure. Honestly, at some point, her brain might have detached and she could have been under a lobotomy for all she knew.

The guy finally stopped, and Helga smiled, thanked him for his support, and he left. It wasn’t even that hard being sincere in her smile, she was just really happy that the guy was leaving.

She opened her bottle of water again and felt the last few drops fall down her throat. Gragh, she was low on water. How was that possible? Should she pee now? Would it be rude to go and pee?

She decided she was still good and decided to smile up at the next fan, a small, tan, floppy hair kid, “Hi, so what do you want me to sign?”

The kid held out a copy of Umbrella Girl Vol 2. She smiled at the kid, man, he looked nervous.

“And your name?” She coaxed gently. She had a feeling she had met this kid before.

“Jayden,” the kid said softly.

“Oh yeah!” she definitely remembered him now. It was one of the weirder names she had heard the last tour. “You brought Umbrella Girl 1 the last time, right?”

Jayden nodded eagerly.

“Well, kid. You’re very dedicated. I really wanna thank you, I have never had such a devoted fan before.” she teased, taking out her pen and wrote a little message, ending it with a flourish of her signature. Jayden flushed, but he nodded with a grin. His mom, who was with them, beamed and asked if Helga was open to taking a picture. Helga had to agree cause why not? Jayden looked like he was a very shy kid, and she liked shy kids. They usually had more to offer. They were part of the reason she wrote children’s books.

She had signed, “It was great seeing you. I hope you love number 2 as much as number 1.” It was nice to create small messages for the nice fans.

By now it had been what seemed like one hour later, and the queue was finally waning. Helga was
feeling very very exhausted, and was near the end of her tether. She could KILL for a cider right now.

She took a deep breath, controlled the rage that was near the bottom her sternum, breathed it all out, and stepped up her game face.

“ Well, hi, thanks for waiting so long!” She greeted, looking up at a tiny black woman who was looking very excited at seeing her. The tiny woman was cute, but she had a very flashy brooch of a spider on her chest.

“ Hi, thanks! Please make it out to Nadine.” She said.

Helga chuckled despite herself, because it had reminded her of something, “That’s so cool, I used to know a Nadine once, she loved bugs, always knew all about science, kept talking about owning spiders...” she trailed off as she started putting the pieces together and the woman was actually starting to laugh and nod to confirm her reaction. “ Oh wow! Nadine! I’m sorry, I didn’t recognise you!”

“ No biggie, Pataki!” She smiled. Helga was relieved. Of all the people she expected to be in the queue today, and with all her fears that it would be someone she had been rough with before, Nadine was good. She was always around when they were kids, but Helga didn’t know her well, beyond seeing her parents once or twice. As far as familiar faces went, Nadine was pretty good.

“I just wanted to say though, “ Nadine was gushing now. “ I really really loved your work. In fact, that’s how I got this guy here-” she gestured at a taller blonde man behind her, wearing a blue shirt and carrying a green sweater. “ Into your work. He and I just wanted to say hi and get our books signed!”

Helga was only able to get a proper glance at the man in question before the man looked down at her, smiled a little and said,” Hey Helga.”


Whoever this guy was, he was cute. Longish blonde hair that was getting kinda rumpled from running his hands through too many times, but tousled so his hair was a mix of dark antique gold and light blonde. His voice was rather raspy, and it would do well sung into a microphone, or maybe even whispered in an ear. He had really nice eyes, like looking into yellow and green glass mixed together in a mosaic. He had decent shoulders, pretty great arms that were revealed because the man had rolled his shirt sleeves up... and a distinctive head shape. Helga frowned. She knew that she recognised that head shape before.

She decided to go for a, “It’s great to meet you!” And held her arm out to shake. The man hesitated, before he slowly reached out to hold hers.

A quiet wind rustled through when they shook hands. The moment felt poignant somehow.

Then Helga finally, FINALLY put the pieces together, along with the,” Hey Helga” line.

Oh.

OH.
Nadine looked back and forth between the both of them before she realised what had happened. “So, Helga, Arnold, should I leave you two alone or...”

Arnold Shortman.

Hot Blondie was Arnold Shortman?

Hot damn!

Helga was so shocked that she blurted out, “Arnold?!” in such a high, sharp tone of shock that she accidentally squeezed Arnold’s hand a little too hard. The blonde man gave a little huff of pain, and Helga winced. Ah great, only been a few minutes and already she was hurting Arnold, way to go progress!

Putting her game face on, she turned back to Arnold and Nadine and said,” Oh I’m so sorry, it’s just a shock, that’s all, I didn’t recognise you. “ Not knowing how else to continue, Helga settled for an impressed, “Damn Shortman, you grew up tall and pretty good. Nicely done.”

Arnold looked confused before he replied that with,” Yeah, no more short man, but well, it was bound to happen.”

The awkward silence between the both of them now had hardened so much that they could grate cheese on it.

That was when Eugene and Phoebe stepped in, and Helga could kiss them both just for that.

“Hey, you two! I didn’t think you guys were coming, step right this way, we have to talk, it’s been ages! Nadine I love your brooches- “ rattled Eugene as he steered the both of them away.

Phoebe waved cheerily at the both of them before she turned to look at Helga. “Helga, oh my god, you okay?”

Helga was looking at Phoebe in a daze.

"Phoebe, was that Arnold Shortman I accidentally manhandled?"

Phoebe silently nodded.

The both of them didn’t talk for a minute.

Then Helga took a deep breath,” I should definitely apologise for nearly breaking his hand huh?”

Phoebe nodded again.

Helga sighed. “Welp, at least now we know what Arnold Shortman would look like as Captain America. Chris Evans could eat his heart out.”

Chapter End Notes
To my knowledge, Sana Takeda has never eaten pork rinds. Let's just suspend our beliefs here.
After Arnold and Nadine were somehow whisked away from the rather awkward scene by Eugene, the redheaded man was now determined to make conversation to keep Nadine and Arnold busy.

Nadine was willing to play along. Either that or she was genuinely interested in the exploits of Eugene and gang since arriving back in Hillwood yesterday. Arnold let her do most of the talking while making interested sounds like, “Mhm, yes, that’s interesting” and impressed noises once in a while.

Inside, however, he was a bundle of nerves.

What was Helga’s reaction all about? Was she surprised that someone like him could grow up okay? She clearly didn’t recognise him until someone brought up his name, and then she was shocked. Was he weird looking now? Practically everybody knew who he was, no one in town had a similar looking head like his.

Well, except for Cousin Arnie, but the last he heard Cousin Arnie had somehow managed to move to Hollywood and was gaining fame and attention as a soap opera star. No one knew why. His lint collection had somehow managed to be worth millions of dollars. Even fewer understood. Or wanted to understand.

That wasn’t the point. That just proved that Arnold was the furthest thing from Helga’s mind. It meant that it was possible Helga didn’t think of him much.

Was that a good thing? Was that bad? Was that horrendous?

He was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn’t hear Nadine mentioning his name until she had to gently slap him on the face.

”Fuck!” Okay that didn’t hurt but damn, he wasn’t expecting that. “What was that for?”

“You were gone for like 15 mins!” hissed Nadine. “I thought you were having some sort of trance. I figured this was the best way to do it! Slap out of it!”

Arnold decided not to ask where Nadine had got that phrase. Eugene was covering his mouth and trembling. It was possible he was either about to cry or found everything in front of him ludicrous.

A snerk escaped Eugene. Yeah, he thought this was funny.

”So Eugene has invited us over to join them for beers at the bar.” Nadine informed, “And I said yes. You’re coming with us too.”

Arnold wanted to protest but then realised that exposure was the easiest way to break his crush. This was a very good solution!

He and Helga would be in a social setting, he and she could interact, and by the end of everything, he would see that she was just a normal person, having normal habits, and then he could extricate out
of this feelings bit with no guilt whatsoever! What choice! What great ideas! He was going to make
awesome ideas!

He picked up his phone. “Think I can get Gerald down too? Make it an even 6?”

Nadine paused for a bit. “Would Phoebe be cool with inviting her ex down?”

That did make him pause too. “I’ll check with her later,” he mumbled.

It would be cool if he actually did have some backup, and he and Gerald hadn’t seen each other
much this week. Besides, this would be a great time for a mini-reunion.

After Phoebe had agreed that she was fine in Gerald coming down, the group waited for Helga to
finish up her signing duties, change out of her steampunk clothes into a regular black tank top and
pants, say goodbye to the old proprietor who was cleaning up with the other retail assistants of the
store, and they all left together.

Helga made small talk with Nadine and Eugene up in front, leading the way to the club Eugene was
taking them to. Phoebe and Arnold were strolling at the back, chatting and catching up.

“So, Gerald coming down is fine with you?” Arnold asked for the umpteenth time.

Phoebe nodded and smiled, “Contrary to popular beliefs, Arnold, an ex can still be friends with
another ex, especially if both sides split up amicably. We were teenagers in love, but we wanted to
explore different sides of the country and take different roles. He wanted to learn camera work, I
wanted to be a doctor. It made sense, and we don’t begrudge each other for it.”

Arnold nodded along too. He then asked, in a lower tone so no one in front could hear, “How’s
Helga anyway? I know Big Bob Pataki is back in town, and that might not have been good for
Helga.”

Phoebe stopped. “You’ve seen Big Bob Pataki?” she said in a low voice, saying his name with a
little bit of menace and disgust. “When?”

Arnold tried to recall. “4-5 days ago, I think. He mentioned Helga doesn’t keep in touch with
them.”

Phoebe scoffed, “Big Bob Pataki is an unpleasant man who you shouldn’t mention to Helga. Helga
wants nothing to do with the man and you shouldn’t mention that you saw him, okay?”

Arnold was shocked, not because of what Phoebe had said, but because she had actually scoffed at
Big Bob. Phoebe was never one to say a horrible word about anyone. He saw that she was still
waiting for an answer, and he replied yes softly. Phoebe nodded firmly, and they left it at that.

They reached the bar Eugene wanted to go to, where a tall Chinese man with a scruffy beard met
them. Eugene had walked up to him, said hi, and introduced him as Caleb to the rest of the group.
Judging by the way Caleb was a little flushed when he saw Eugene, and how Eugene leaned into
him a little, they seemed to be dating, and Arnold thought it was kinda cute. They all walked in and
managed to get the bartender to help connect two tables together, and they all gathered around
waiting for menus and chatting lightly.

Arnold somehow managed to wind up seated opposite Helga, at the side of the table, with Phoebe
and Eugene next to them. It almost felt like it was a date.
No, stop that, Shortman, don’t be silly. He scolded himself. It’s just a group outing, Helga would be nice but she wouldn’t consider this a date thing. She’s a normal, well-behaved adult. Normal well-behaved adults are normal!

He could see Helga asking him something, he should pay attention. “What’s that Helga?”

Helga raised an eyebrow, but repeated the question, “I asked if you’d been here before, Arnold.”

Arnold laughed, sheepishly. “Oh right.” He looked at their surroundings and realised that he did recognise the place. The teachers had a celebration here once when Mr Gregori retired from the service. Everyone had a rather bland affair at the teacher’s staffroom, all enjoyed cake, and then they went to this bar where they became raucous and cheerful. Mr Gregori didn’t go. He was rather shitty and no one wanted to talk to him.

He told that story to Helga, who listened and laughed. “What did he do that was shitty to you Arnold? Didn’t pay his parking tickets or something?”

”He had a tendency to make the female staff members uncomfortable with his comments, and the kids never liked him. I suspect it was cause he never liked teaching.”

“Huh,” Helga pondered over that. “I mean, that’s really kinda shitty.”

“Told you.”

They both laughed a little over that.

”So, if you’ve been here before, tell me what’s good to eat here.”

Arnold looked over the menu. “Well, there’s the fruit salad-”

”What’s in it?”

Arnold listed off the ingredients, and Helga’s brow furrowed. “Nah, not for me. Eugene is allergic to about three of those ingredients, and I am allergic to one.”

”Really?”

”Yeah, can’t eat strawberries. Makes me swell up in hives.”

Arnold hadn’t known that before. “Anything else you can’t eat?”

Helga shook her head. “If you’re getting something to share though, check with Eugene on what he can and can’t eat. The man has like a thousand and one allergies and starters are hopeless. I would say fries and wings work best.”

Arnold checked with the rest of the group and they agreed. So they all got bbq wings and fries to share, with three different types of fries. They would only get mains when Gerald arrived. They also ordered their drinks, and they all got served accordingly.

Helga took a sip of her cider and sighed. “Oh thank you Lord for this bountiful treat. After the day I’ve had today, I deserve this wholeheartedly.”
Arnold chuckled. “Book signings not your thing?”

“Oh no, I’m used to it, part of the job and all. It’s just that earlier—” and Helga paused, appearing to muse over her words. Arnold waited for her to finish, but was getting concerned when she didn’t continue. He was about to ask if she was okay, but she took a swig of her drink, and replied. “I had to do something kinda stupid, really, and it was a near nightmare. I don’t really wanna talk about it.”

Arnold nodded, showing that he respected that, and Helga gave him a little smile, a small twitch of the lips.

They spent some time quietly listening to what their friends were saying, and contributed a little to some of it. Helga laughed when Eugene told a story about how they met, and Nadine shared the story of how Arnold and her got into trouble trying to get a class to rescue the mice in her class. Everyone laughed at that story and their drinks were served, which erupted in more stories told about drinking. When Gerald arrived, they all raised their glasses in rapturous cheer, and he sat down next to Nadine. Arnold and Helga, unconsciously, tensed up.

Gerald gave a nod to Phoebe, who smiled upon seeing him, and the possible awkwardness between two exes was wiped clean away. Helga and Arnold relaxed from the tension they didn’t even know they had, and when they both caught each other doing so, they laughed, unspokenly becoming allies in a war they didn’t even know they were fighting.

“You too?” Helga whispered.

Arnold nodded. “Gerald was really cut up when they broke up.”

”Holy fuck, so was Phoebe. I had to stay with her the whole night while she cried, and we ate so much junk food it was really unhealthy.”

Arnold grinned, “Gerald and I sat on the rooftop while watching crappy tv, and did the same.”

Helga smirked, “Did he make you fry spam and cut them up into fries, eating them with mayo? Phoebe did.”

”Man, the things we do for our friends.”

The both of them laughed and raised their glasses to clink them.

“…AND THEN HE ATE THE ENTIRE HAM!” Gerald ended rapturously, and the table laughed and gasped.

Arnold, who had heard the story before, and in fact was there when the story happened, sipped his beer down, watching Helga toss her head back as she laughed uproariously.

It was nice, really. Helga sitting across from him, her guard down and her eyes twinkling with mirth. Her shoulders were relaxed, a far cry from the past where her shoulders would be squared with tension and stiffness, and she had not scowled once since sitting down or threatened to beat anyone up, or even rolled her eyes derisively at the conversation.

Well, she did roll her eyes a lot, but in fondness rather than any actual spite.

They had already ordered their mains and were waiting for them to arrive. Apparently, the place was
famous for their fish and chips, and that was what a few of them had ordered. Helga, Gerald, and Nadine, on the other hand, ordered steak and baked potatoes. All of them had their appetites somewhat sated with their starters, but were still excited when their mains arrived.

” How’s your steak?” Arnold asked, watching Helga grab a knife, saw her meat and take a bite.

” Mhmm.” Helga sighed, her eyes closing and giving a small groan of happiness. Arnold winced a little because that was not a sound he wanted to hear from Helga because he didn’t want encouragement on his crush. “ Oh my god, this is delicious. Phoebe!” she gestured to her friend, who had been engaged in conversation with Nadine. “ You have to try this, swap a piece with me.”

Phoebe, ever willingly, cut up a piece of her fish and passed it to Helga, who obligingly passed a piece of her steak to Phoebe. Turning to Arnold, she asked, “ Hey, Football Head, want some?”

“ I- I don’t-”

“ Arnoldo, you have to try this, you okay with medium-rare meat right?” she pressed. Arnold nodded and Helga passed him a piece.

” Man, I love steak so much,” Helga said. ‘ When I was in Michigan during school, I never had a chance to eat steak, cause damn, it was expensive.”

”Oh really?” Arnold asked. He was lucky, a portion of the money that the government gave the Shortman family funded part of his education, and though he did have a job to fill up his time, he never did have to scrimp for things most of the time.

” Yeah,” Helga said. “ Besides, I did so many rehearsals and stage days, so we had food packs catered in. I swear, I spent a lot of time in that theatre, eating with the theatre people in the dressing rooms.”

” Wow.”

” Yeah. Try the meat, tell me if you like it,” Helga said.

Arnold obliged and was pleasantly surprised. “ Huh.” he said,” I never had medium rare before.”

Helga dropped her knife in shock. “ What?!” she cried. “ You’ve never had- what?!”

Arnold nodded slowly, wondering what the problem was.

” That’s just…Football Head, how have you not had medium rare meat before? Please don’t tell me…you had it well-done. Oh cripes, if you had it well-done, I will disown you.”

” We’re not in a family, Helga.” he said, a little touched that she remembered such an old nickname.

” Oh, please. I can do what I want.”

The rest of the dinner was spent chatting, laughing and swapping stories. Helga related a few stories from her university days, some stories involving Eugene and the club they frequented, where some of Eugene’s fellow drag performers had welcomed Helga and their shenanigans. Helga’s talent for mimicry and impressions was still in top form, and by the time they finished eating, she had the whole table positively weeping with glee over a story of Eugene’s first performance, where he tried to lipsync to a song from the old musical Rats, and tripped, fell over onto the audience, and then tried
to pretend that it was intentional, thanks to Helga getting the sound people to switch the music to a remix of Rihanna’s S&M.

Arnold, laughing, was totally in his element, when suddenly Helga said something that jolted him out of his thoughts.

He looked at her again to confirm that she had said what she had said, but decided to eloquently express that with the nicely put, “Whuh?”

Helga rolled her eyes, but in fondness, “Honestly, I thought you would have stopped daydreaming about things at this point.”

Arnold flushed, but pushed on, “Just-repeat what you said,”

Helga laughed, but it wasn’t mocking, just teasing. “I said I didn’t sign your books just now, so I have a pen, tell me what you want signed, and I will sign it.”

”Ah, you don’t have to do that, Helga—”

The next part would shock him, as Helga looked him in the eye and said, “Arnold Shortman, you will not know this, but you were one of the reasons my moral compass is merely dented rather than actually broken, so forgive me if I want to show my gratefulness by making a few marks on your books. Now gimme.”

The offer was nice, but Arnold still hesitated. “I wouldn’t want to impose-I have like 3 books of yours right now—”

”Well, what are you waiting for? Give them over.”

Arnold wanted to protest, but seeing that Helga had the stubborn clench in her chin that she had when she was a kid and much angrier, he sighed and opened his satchel.

Helga scanned the books, “Okay, cool, Umbrella Girl 1 and 2, and…” she trailed off. “Moonlit Soliloquys!”

Arnold tried to explain why and how he got the book, but Helga brushed him off, “Sweet, Gerald said you liked this one. Now I can get this signed for you.”

She wrote three messages, and seemed to take her time with the inscription on the poetry book, and signed all three with a flourish. “There,” she said with finality, putting down her pen. “I signed all three, what are you going to do about it?”

Arnold looked at all three, and smiled. “Maybe ask you for your phone number so we can actually keep in touch.”

Now it was Helga’s turn to hesitate. “Do you-nah, you really don’t want to—”

Arnold looked at her in the eye, and said, “Helga, you may not know this, but you’ve pushed me to do things I wouldn’t have done before when I was a kid, and I never really thanked you for helping me out when we were 11 in San Lorenzo. The least we can do is be friends, and keep being friends.”
He wasn’t sure why he was saying that now, but here he was, taking out his phone and passing it straight to her. “Put down your number, and I’ll message you. I promise we will use it to at least keep in touch, you don’t have Facebook, and I only have that and Instagram. We can at least chat once in a while, no obligations. Okay?”

Helga looked a little unsure, but then shrugged, “Eh, okay,” she said. She tossed over her phone to Arnold, they both added their digits to each other’s phones and passed them back. Then Helga took her phone, made a few taps, and asked Arnold for his Instagram handle.

“Why?”

“So we can keep in touch, oh my god.” She grinned. “Also I have a few friends who are into the whole teacher-student kink but think there are no hot teachers out there. You’re the only one I know that can be a good example. Come on, help me out here. I gotta prove people wrong.”

Arnold laughed, “Whatever you say, Helga. It’s @shortmansfolly.”

Helga thought he was hot? And wanted his Instagram handle? Granted it was to prove her friends wrong, but he could deal with that. Hot teacher was still a compliment. He watched as Helga found and followed his account, and scrolled through his photos.

She seemed to stop and laugh at one at some point, “Okay, explain this, Shortman.” She said, turning her phone to show Arnold what she was looking at, which was a photo of Arnold covered in yellow paint, his class in the background all with similar results.

Arnold groaned, “Ah, fuck. There was a very weird day. A student says something, another gets defensive, and then paint goes everywhere. I managed to get things sorted but that took awhile and this was the result.”

Helga laughed, “Criminy, reminds me of the time we fought over the paint cup and we both got splashed with paint, remember that?”

Arnold winced. That really wasn’t his finest moment.

Helga looked at him in concern.” Shortman? Ah fuck, don’t worry about it, it was a very long time ago, I was being angry and defensive and it really shouldn’t have happened, I’m sorry, and I started it.” She paused, “Hey, I actually managed to apologise to you about a tiny bit of my transgressions. Maybe there IS a cure to stubborness.”

That made Arnold laugh.

”And look, if it means that much to you, fine. I didn’t treat you very nice when we were kids, Arnold, and I must have caused you a hell load of shit you probably didn’t deserve.”

”Probably?”

”Hey, I’m working on it, Shortman. Anyway, just for that, you and I are gonna be friends so that we can make up for not being really good ones when we were kids.” She looked at Arnold from the corner of her eye, suddenly looked nervous and tense.“You okay with that?”

Arnold smiled. “It’s a deal.”
The group separated at the end of the night, all of them hugging and promising to keep in touch. Helga and Arnold hesitated, before Helga opened her arms in a, “Is this okay?” move. Arnold grinned, and hugged her back.

Then Helga, Eugene, Caleb and Phoebe started making their way back to the loft they were staying at. Once there, Caleb and Eugene shared a small kiss good night outside the loft, while Phoebe and Helga, being the good friends they were, stood inside bearing huge beaming smiles for Eugene as he walked in, flushed and embarrassed at having been caught out by two of his friends. “Can it.” he warned as he took off his coat.

”Tell us about it, Jinkxy!” both Phoebe and Helga sang out in a teasing voice, and collapsed against each other laughing when Eugene glared at them.

”Why not you tell us about you and Arnold, Hell-Girl?” Eugene shot back. Phoebe laughed and gave him a high-five.

”What’s there to talk about?” Helga asked nonchalantly. “We talked, we had fun, I signed all three of his books, and we exchanged phone numbers because we’re friends and adults, and that’s what normal adults do. I even managed to apologise for a bit of my behaviour bullying him when we were kids. It’s not much, but he accepted it.”

Phoebe made a squeal and Eugene collapsed on his knees, throwing his hands up to the sky. “Thank you Jesus, our baby girl has grown up and making amazing decisions!”

”Amen!” Phoebe cheered, joining Eugene where he was on the floor and going on her knees too. “Hallelujah, thank you Peter, Paul, and Mary, and thank you Beyonce!”

Helga rolled her eyes, but laughed at Phoebe, who had really low alcohol tolerance and got really high on one drink. She loved this bunch of people a hell lot.

When Arnold and Gerald got home, and got themselves cleaned up, Arnold finally opened up his satchel to check on the books, and read the messages inside all three.

He didn’t get what he had expected. All three were signed, but all three had a different message on them.

On Umbrella Girl Vol. One, Helga had wrote,” I hope you find someone who gives you an umbrella the same way you have done for others.”

He felt personally touched by this message, but he didn’t clearly understand why.

The second volume, Helga had wrote, “Continue being that shining light for your students the same way you did for your first set of kids: us.”

Now that one was making him embarrassingly soppy. He didn’t think he had influenced anyone’s lives in so much detail before, and least of all Helga’s, but he would take it.

On Moonlit Soliloquys, Helga had written, “Sometimes the best poems are the ones you find in your dreams. Keep that passion alive, and you will realise it to your fullest potential. I have faith in you.”
Arnold’s heart was pounding so hard reading that inscription, that he nearly dropped the book in shock. But upon picking the book up again, it finally hit him.

Tonight wasn’t just the night he and Helga became friends.

Tonight might also be the night that he found out he really, truly, and definitely had a crush on Helga G Pataki.

Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN DUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUN.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Spoilers for who the Winter Soldier is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

So Arnold woke up the next day, having slept very deeply thanks to the beer. As was his habit, he turned over to have a look at his phone, and found one message in his inbox.

It was from Nadine, who had insisted on getting group photos of everyone in the group. Arnold had received 6 photos of the dinner group in question. There he was in the back with Helga, Helga smiling for the camera, and Arnold too. It was one of the first few photos he had with Helga in 17 years, along with the rest of the group, and he thought considering he and Helga were all the way in the back, they were still decent photos. One of the few where both of them were actually smiling.

He wondered if Nadine had sent any of them to Phoebe, Eugene or Helga. He figured that it was his civic duty to send them to the people who were in the photo, for the purpose of memories and all. And since the only phone number he had was Helga’s, it just made sense to send her the photos and whatever conversation the photos started, he could talk to her about it. Of course it was. There was no ulterior motive at all.

He pulled up Helga’s number from his contacts, and added the photos in the conversation box, clicking send. He wondered if he could find a good photo for the contact list. He figured it made sense to trawl through Helga’s Instagram to get one, and since she did follow him on Instagram, it made sense to follow her on hers, right?

Right?

He pulled up her Instagram account and looked at the handle, where you could click to follow her account. @slambamthankHelgaP currently had 39.3k followers, and adding his name to the list would be merely a drop in the bucket, so of course, it would seem normal.

Once he did that, he then panicked, and then decided to follow @HiJinkxyFortuna as well as @phoebeheyerdahl, because he wasn’t just going to ignore his friends he hadn’t seen in a long time, it was just being polite to follow all his friends, not just the one he may have a fondness for! Sure! Yes! He was making amazing life decisions! Helga told him he was a hot teacher, so she followed him to show her friends, and he was following her because they were friends, friends did that kind of stuff all the time!

Behind the door, someone knocked, and Arnold nearly threw his phone in fright. “Ye-yeah?” he squeaked, uncharacteristically for someone usually so cool and calm in any situation.

There was a very long silence, and Gerald’s voice, suspicious and confused. “Arnold, you okay in there?”

”Yes! Yes, I am doing good, I am not doing anything suspicious or weird!” Dammit Shortman, what
the hell are you doing? He mentally screamed at himself.

Another pause, and Gerald said, with more understanding, “Oh okay, sorry man, didn’t mean to invade your private time. I mean, I thought we agreed that if we were doing that, just try to put a sock or something on the knob so we would know not to interrupt or something.”

"Gerald, I am not masturbating, especially not this early in the morning!"

"People less bold than you have done more than that, my man." Gerald yelled back cheerfully. "I just wanted to remind you to eat the food we have in the fridge, we have a lot of leftovers, so take some for lunch for school, and we can have some for dinner later. Oh, and don’t forget, if you need company when you feel alone, use the sock on the door thing, man. I can totally respect that, just don’t keep me locked out of the apartment for too long!"

Arnold could have entered a contest for Best Resemblance To A Tomato and the rest of the contestants would have cried because they couldn’t be as red as he was. Even the tomatoes would have paled in failure. “I- WHAT?!"

"Gotta go, Arnold! Make great choices!” yelled Gerald as he left the apartment, his voice growing fainter as he closed the door.

The phone buzzed and Arnold nearly jumped on the bed to grab his phone. It couldn’t be Helga at this early… could it?

*Hey Shortman! Thanks for the pics! I promise I would take good care of them, feed them everyday and make sure they have their walkies.*

Arnold laughed. At least Helga didn't see anything suspicious about him sending over the photos.

Helga closed her phone just as Phoebe walked into her room, holding the hair curlers.

"All set?” Helga asked. “We’re both gonna be at the convention today, and it’s gonna take a lot of effort transforming this pumpkin into a nicer looking pumpkin.”

Phoebe laughed. “Helga, it’s gonna be fun! I have never been to a convention before, and truth be told, I’m really excited! Can you believe it, we’re going to see comics and amazing fanart and stories-”

"And also a lot of gatekeeping nerds and toxic masculinity, Pheebs.” Helga continued. “I swear, the amount of creepy people I have met in my life all seem to convene at conventions. Remember that guy in school that kept following me around? Imagine that, but all thinking that they are amazingly smart for being nerds. It gets draining.”

Phoebe looked a little dismayed, but she managed to bolster her spirits again. “Well, that’s okay. I have you! And also I’ve heard there will be a graphic novel bookstore, and the lady who plays the new Doctor Who will be there, and so will that author who’s managed to invent a new gender system in their books, and-”

"Woah, woah, hold your horses, Pheeburino!” laughed Helga. “I promise, we will go and see them when my schedule permits, and also I will be taking some of my books and graphic novels to be signed as well, this is the first time all the people I actually like will be there at the same place, but don’t forget, they’re all normal people with normal lives.” She paused, because this was Phoebe she
was talking to, and her friend looked like Helga had told her her puppy was dead. She rushed to say, “But yes, we will see them when we can. I know you will only be able to come with me for two days of the convention, so we’ll do as many things as possible. I promise.”

Phoebe clapped her hands in glee. At that moment, Helga’s phone buzzed, and she grabbed her phone to check who it was.

"Is that Fran?” Phoebe asked.

"It’s Arnold, actually.” Helga replied. He seemed to have replied with an emoji, one that Helga, truth be told, wasn’t sure what it meant. She showed the screen to Phoebe, who took one look at the screen and giggled.

"Is that a good thing?” Helga asked, a little confused.

"Of course, Helga.” Phoebe replied though she sounded a little too gleeful about it. “Arnold sent you a laughing emoji. Admittedly the tears are a little misleading, but it’s meant to be a, ”laughing until you cry” thing. Basically, he thought what you said was hilarious.” She cocked her head questioningly. “What did you say anyway?”

“Oh nothing.” Helga replied absently. “He sent over photos that Nadine must have sent him of yesterday’s shindig. It’s pretty nice, really. We haven’t had such a big reunion like this before, it’s really nice.”

Looking up to see the cat-like grin of Phoebe, Helga rolled her eyes. “Don’t think I’m getting all mushy, Heyerdahl. Arnold and I being friends is the nicest thing I am going to have, and let me tell you, it’s finally great to get along with the football head. At least when I leave Hillwood, I would have at least done something to make up for all the shit I’ve done to him.”

Phoebe looked like Helga had killed her puppy again, and Helga sighed. “Pheebs, dearest, love of my life, I’m doing okay, and I will hug it out with you to tell you that. Okay?”

Phoebe laughed, and Helga hugged her anyway.

Conventions were one of those things where you wouldn’t understand unless you have experienced it first hand. And Helga, who had gone to a few in her time before she became a writer and out on the convention circuit, always underestimated the amount of energy needed to survive for the next few days, and this time, she was working and presenting at the event.

Phoebe, who had never been to a comics convention, but had been to one doctor's convention before, was excited. She was one of those people who was genuinely excited to sit in, and participate, and fully immerse into the experience.

"Isn’t this exciting, Helga?” enthused Phoebe, who had found a trenchcoat and rainbow suspenders as borrowed from Eugene and clothes to dress as a makeshift 13th Doctor from Doctor Who. She had also borrowed a blonde wig from Eugene, which masked her own black bob.

Helga rolled her eyes, but considering the fact that she was dressed in another version of her steampunk outfit, she had no right to judge her best friend. “Don’t get too excited, Phoebe. Remember, it’s gonna be a bit quiet cause it’s a Thursday, and most of the people do Saturdays and Sundays because that’s when they get off work.”
They were standing at the huge conventional hall, watching people set up for the event. A group of roadies were pushing speakers from the far away loading bay to the stage nearby. Vendors were setting up their wares, and a group of Jedi were doing last minute run-throughs of their performances at one corner.

Helga grabbed her phone and took a small video of her surroundings, revolving around a circle to show how everything looked so far. She then uploaded the video to her Instagram stories, and she turned over to Phoebe with a knowing smile. “Come on.”

"Huh?"

"Take a selfie with me, Thirteen."

The 29-year-old doctor who was, funnily enough, dressed as a Doctor, laughed, and obligingly did so.

Arnold, who had been scrolling through Instagram as part of his morning routine on the bus, laughed at the photo that Helga had posted, immediately liking and commented, “A doctor playing The Doctor! I think I got that reference!” he typed.

Clicking send, it only took 3 minutes before he got a text message from Helga.

Omg, that comment…you know what that means right?

Arnold paused, confused over what that meant. He decided to send a ? as his reply.

The reply he got back was instantaneous.

Holy shit, you don’t know what you did. Which makes this amazing. Has anyone ever told you you were a throwback to a previous generation? Or that you were an old man in a young man’s body? I …might have? He replied. It was in fact Gerald who said that to him, when he went through Arnold’s Spotify looking for something to listen to and all he found were Dino Spumoni albums and Ella Fitzgerald albums.

Wow, okay, this checks out all my theories. This is amazing. Does the Smithsonian know the oldest living white guy is actually in Hillwood? They may actually need to examine you.

He rolled his eyes, but chuckled. Helga’s rather snarky remarks just seemed funny to him now. Whatever you say, Helga. He typed back. How’s the event so far?

Waiting for Helga to reply (she was taking a bit longer this time), Arnold looked up and realised he was fast approaching his stop to get off to PS. 118., and he pulled the rope. The bus grinded to a halt and he got off, thanking the bus driver as he passed, and walked with a bounce towards the school and the staffroom.

His phone buzzed again, and he turned his head down to look at it, secretly hoping it was Helga.

It wasn’t Helga.

In fact, it was someone that Arnold didn’t realise he didn’t want to butt into his business until right then.
hey Shortman, heard you met the girl with the one eyebrow yesterday, how was your
daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaate?

Arnold groaned. How, oh how oh how, did Grandpa Phil know about the stuff that happened yesterday?

grandpa no what are you talking about

Don’t lie to me boy!

How did you find out? He typed, immediately dreading the answer. He bet it was the damn gossip
tree. Did they graduate phones now? He wouldn’t put it past them to do that. Damn the elderly and
their need to gossip!

Gerald put up the photos on Instagram, and your mom showed us.

That…was easier than expected. Maybe he shouldn’t blame the gossip tree for everything.

Deciding the jig was up, he decided to reply, yeah I saw her. We all went out as a group, Grandpa.
It’s not a date.

Grandpa just sent back a winky face. How did he find out about emojis? What else would his
grandfather surprise him with now.

Nadine strolled by, looking at his perplexed face with a smile. “What’s happening, Arnold?” she
asked, and now that Arnold was looking at her properly, she seemed to be carrying a tank with a
small snake in it.

”My family is being weird and controversial again,” sighed Arnold.

Nadine smiled as she stopped at her desk, placing the snake tank on the table, and picking up the
small white snake to drape over her arm. It was rather cute, with black beady eyes and a sweet
expression for a snake. He didn’t mind snakes, he felt they were cute and were misunderstood quite a
lot.

(They had a snake once. They called him Francoise. He was a good snake. He tried to eat Abner a
few times. He was good, not amazing).

Nadine let Arnold stroke the head of the snake, cooing as the snake flicked its tongue out once to
taste the air. “This is Peaches.” she cooed. “Peaches is the snake I am taking to class today. Let’s
hope no one tries to eat her.”

Arnold stopped stroking the snake mid-way. “Did that…happen before?”

”You’ll be surprised.”

Arnold’s phone buzzed again. From the small glimpse he saw of the screen, it seemed to be from
Helga.

Nadine caught the delighted look on Arnold’s face and smirked. “Oooh, I know that look. That’s
the look you get when you’re dating someone…” she trailed off. “That can’t be right, you haven’t
met anyone yet unless-” She cut herself off, and started squealing. “It’s Helga! You’re smitten with
Helga!”
Arnold shocked that he got caught by Nadine, tried to deny it, but Nadine was now smiling with such evil that he wasn’t sure if that was a good idea. Even Peaches seemed to smirk.

"Does she know?" Nadine asked. "Does she? Hmm?" she teased, laughing at the tall blonde man’s expression.

He sighed. "Look. Say for example that I do have a crush on her, which I don’t," he repeated while Nadine started snickering. "She doesn’t know it yet, we just became friends again, so I am not jinxing it, we are not talking about it, she doesn’t know. Can we stick with that?"

Nadine looked disappointed, "But you two are so cute together!"

"You’ve only seen us once, Nadine."

"Eh, good point." said the Science teacher, now giving her attention to Peaches the snake, which allowed Arnold to get a look at his phone to read the message. Helga had sent him a photo of the convention, and a message, which read:

*Busy as hell, nerds are weird. Sorry if I don’t reply quickly, people keep asking me questions, and Phoebe won’t let me stay on my phone when signing.*

"I still think you’re missing out, Shortman!" sang Nadine as she walked out the staffroom doors with Peaches on her hand. Peaches turned back to make eye contact with Arnold, as if to agree with Nadine.

Arnold sighed. He was missing out, but he finally had a pretty decent friendship going on with Helga right now, it would be shitty for him to ruin it and make her think he wanted to be friendly just to get in her pants. It was just day one.

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Day One of the convention went pretty great for Helga, considering Helga’s prediction that it would be pretty quiet. She still got a pretty decent queue going on, and Phoebe left at times to go explore the booths since it was quiet enough for her to do so.

She came back to Helga’s booth with two bags full of merchandise, and Helga could only gape as she saw Phoebe take out fanart bought from vendors, a replica of the Doctor’s sonic screwdriver, a few badge pins she got of that dating sim game she played when she was on call and bored, and a Funko Pop figurine of Thor in his Saakar gladiator outfit.

"Wow, Pheebs, considering the fact that you work so much, you know a lot of pop culture." Helga said drily.

Phoebe flushed, but she laughed, because Helga, despite her acting too cool for school, watched a lot of the same shows she did and was even a big fan of the newest Thor movie. "Helga, you should go take a break to walk around so you can get some of the merch!"

Helga laughed. "I still have a good 30 minutes left before I take a break, so I figure I can go see stuff then, it would be fine. Do you want to come with me and walk around some more?"

"If she doesn’t, maybe I can go with you." said a new voice.

Helga and Phoebe looked up, and Helga’s reaction upon seeing the person in question was ecstatic. "
Patty?!” Helga smiled widely, as she got up to give the tall brunette a hug.

Patty laughed, hugging Helga back, her tall, buff frame dwarfing Helga, even though Helga was tall and spent quite a bit of time boxing in the gym.

This could be due to two things: Patty’s job as a personal trainer working with people who wanted to specialize in strength building, or the fact that Patty taught netball to interested parties at the YMMA. Her schedule was always filled to the max, which was why Helga and Phoebe never saw her much. The fact that Patty was now back in Hillwood too was a surprise as well.

”What, I can’t come down to visit my mom and see a convention?” Patty remarked drily to the two people, “I like books, and I can appreciate a pretty poem. Especially by someone like Helga G Pataki.”

Helga stood up. “For you, Patty, anything.” she beamed.

While Patty was one of the people Helga lashed out at when she found out she was leaving Hillwood, Patty and she had in fact reconnected a few years after, when Patty bumped into her when Helga was doing a shift at her barista job in Michigan. Patty had moved to Michigan and started working at a nearby bookstore working as a retail assistant to earn cash before going to university the next town over from Helga.

At first, Helga and Patty were somewhat hostile to each other, Patty was still smarting from Helga’s caustic remarks to her, and Helga still a little defensive and angry at people who knew her when she cared about her reputation. They both had their defences lowered as the time went by, and 3 months later, Patty and Helga were friends. When Patty moved to college in the end, Helga, with the first show of kindness, decided to extend the olive branch, and offered Patty a place to crash should she want to visit her again. Patty had accepted.

Now, the two women were chatting, laughing as Helga finished signing books, and afterwards, the three women wandered the convention grounds, laughing, joking, and getting food, taking turns to catch up, laugh, and give their opinions on the loot they were slowly accumulating.

Patty seemed to have a thing for Overwatch, especially for Zarya, so they stopped by to look at the fanart that shipped Zarya with Mei. Helga and Phoebe had never played the game before, but Patty assured them that the game was exciting and the characters were diverse enough to keep the interest going for a long period of time.

They all went to the Oculus Rift booth to try out a Game of Thrones and Helga laughed as Phoebe squeaked in panic when the booth started shaking and she, in whatever reality she was looking at, was up high on the Wall.

They even went to see the fanart of some of the vendors, and Helga was impressed at the skill some of them had, especially the ones who did fanart and merch of her work. The vendors squealed when they saw her, she said hi and told them they were doing amazing work, and signed a few of their badges for them to sell, as well as copies of their books.

At some point, Helga bought some Iron Man merch, because, despite the fact that she mostly liked do-gooder characters who wanted to save the world, she also had a soft spot for the man of genius and snark. The man had a complicated history and did his best to work off his debt to society. She could totally respect a guy like that.

When she turned back, Phoebe was looking at her strangely.
"…What?" Helga asked warily.

"Iron Man…Tony Stark?" Phoebe asked, "Doesn’t a version of him get married to Captain America in another Marvel Universe or something?"

Helga shrugged, “Yeah? That’s a thing. Tony Stark and Steve Rogers get married in another universe, and prevents the first civil war between the heroes, and…” she stopped, remembering just who she was referring to Captain America a few days ago.

"…No.” she intoned slowly.

Patty looked at the both of them curiously, and Phoebe started squealing. “It’s as if you’re Iron Man and Arnold is Captain America!”

“Oh, that’s still going on?” Patty asked, laughing. It wasn’t a huge surprise to Patty when Helga revealed her crush on Arnold when she was a kid, Patty had merely looked at her and went, “Uhhuh, then?” According to Patty, it had been pretty evident.

Helga growled a little, mostly in embarrassment, “Pheebs, I’m not Iron Man, and while Arnold is totally Captain America, we’re not together. Even if I were Iron Man, don’t they hate each other? I thought Captain America was totally in love with the Winter Soldier or something.”

Patty thought about this, “If Winter Soldier is meant to be Captain America’s childhood friend… does that mean Gerald is the Winter Soldier or something?”

All three women stopped to consider the idea.

” I’ll ship it.” Helga said. Phoebe nodded. Patty looked like she wanted to argue, but then she thought about it a bit more and conceded that it COULD happen.

Arnold’s phone buzzed during class, and though he had a strict rule about looking at his phone during class, he managed to get a quick glimpse at the screen to see that it was Helga who was sending him texts. He had ignored it then but when the kids were on their break, he got a look at his phone to see his phone messages.

Helga had sent him a few photos and a few messages.

The first seemed to be of Helga with a few of her fans, smiling as she signed their books. Arnold liked the fact that she looked like how she did when they were at the bookstore, her hat askew but in a jaunty angle, and her eyes alight when she was signing for her fans.

The second seemed to be a few fun pics of her, Phoebe and another taller woman doing various activities, as well as a few selfies of them eating tacos. Helga had sent, “Arnold, look! Patty Smith’s here and we’re all having fun doing nerdery stuff! Sucks to be in school eating the mystery meat, hahahaha.”

Arnold rolled his eyes at that, but smiled.

”You’re smitten, Arnold….” Nadine, who had seen him smiling over something, and had sneaked up behind him to see who he was messaging, whispered in a loud, stage-whisper.
Arnold rolled his eyes again, but in more exasperation. “Go away, Nadine.”

"Smiiiiiiittttttteennnnnnn." Nadine hissed again in a drawn out whisper, Peaches on her arm and hissing with the same effect as she pretended to move away backwards like a ghost.

Arnold decided at this point that it might be good to get new family and friends. Maybe Helga knew people that could do the job, everyone here was too nosy and too interested in his life for him to function properly.

Chapter End Notes

My ships and fandoms are sorta obvious here.

I wish I could have fit in a strong love for Taika Waititi, cause UMPH DADDY.

EDIT: ARRKU DID THE ART FOR SMITTEN.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

So.

I wanted to write the chapter. But then I decided to rewrite the chapter. And then got stuck rewriting it. And then I spent the rest of the time in Australia. And now I'm back and the chapter is boring but I AM TRYING.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

On Friday evening, Arnold was having a great time at home. He had finally finished marking papers, his students were doing better than expected (Except maybe Gregory, who still didn’t understand what a Holocaust was, and assumed it something to do with lasers), Nadine had stopped teasing him, and even Peaches had stopped smirking at him.

That last one might have been a bit more on his own perception than anything else.

He was now lying back in bed, thankful for having finished the essay marking and that for once, just once, he had a perfectly free weekend. Dino Spumoni was playing in the background, he was thinking of making a cup of hot chocolate in 5 minutes-

“Arnold, you free at the mo-“ his room door opened before it closed again, and before Arnold could question or ask what Gerald was up to, a knocking sound was heard, and Gerald’s voice, “Hey, Arnold, you decent?”

Arnold got up, now confused. “Yeah, I’m fine?” And yes, phrasing that sentence as a question made sense in this context.

The door opened, and Gerald walked in, “Ah great, now I need a favour-“

“What was that about?” Arnold asked, immediately dreading the answer. The look Gerald gave him for that question was enough for him to groan.

“Well, I wanted to make sure your privacy’s respected!” grinned his roommate, who was dressed in jeans and a sweater, his cheeks darker than usual from the cold outside. He had most probably come back straight from work. “Exploring your sexuality is a great thing man, just warn me so you can do it on your own.”

Arnold sighed, which he seemed to be doing a lot these days.”I keep telling you, I was not masturbating.” He figured it was time he came clean to his best friend because it would work to prevent any future misunderstandings. “Look G, I’ll be truthful okay?”

Gerald nodded, being the good friend that he was, and sat down on the chair that Arnold used for his desktop.

Arnold took a deep breath and decided to come straight out and be clear about what happened but still be subtle.
“I was embarrassed because I sent an embarrassing text to someone,” Arnold blurted out quickly, rushing the words out so he didn’t have to feel the impact him being truthful to someone would inevitably feel. “And when you came in, I panicked, and I dropped my phone.”

There was a pause while Gerald mused over his words. Arnold hoped his best friend would understand his agony.

“Man, dick pics?” Gerald asked.

Gerald was not his best friend anymore.

The man laughed at the reaction of his blonde, shorter friend, “I’m messing with you, Arnold!” he teased.

Maybe he could reapply for best friend next month.

“It’s all good, all good.” Gerald cackled. “I figured it was something like that. I didn’t think you’ve met anyone new recently, who is it?”

“Erm,” said Arnold articulately.

“I KID, I KID.” smirked Gerald, reaching out to give his best friend a noogie on the head. “We’re bros, and best friends, you will tell me when you’re comfortable, and I will support you. Unless it’s that Fifty Shades fan, that’s just wrong.”

Arnold nodded. Maybe Gerald was still his best friend.

“So what did you come in here for anyway?” Arnold asked, relaxing against his pillows again.

“Yeah, remember August when you helped me with that video work?” The black guy leaned back against the wheelie chair. “My cameraman dropped out again, think you can sub in?”

The man nodded. He had been looking forward to a weekend without any scruples or engagements but this was fairly easy, he had done stuff like this before, helping Gerald with camera work while Gerald did his thing being in front of the camera and hosting. It helped that while Rhonda could be a trifle shallow, she was generous to a fault, and paid Arnold when he had to sub in for the camera work, as well as paying for his expenses and food. Nobody else was ever that nice to people that didn’t work for them. “Where at?” he asked, hoping it was somewhere nice.

“Some comic fest, near an hour from here,” Gerald replied airily. “It’s the place Helga’s going to be at, Phoebe mentioned it on Wednesday—“

Arnold froze, his gaze falling straight to his phone.

He and Helga had been exchanging texts since Thursday, and all of them were just casual texts, that started from him asking how Helga’s day at the convention was going, to a random, long conversation about the newest horror movie and how it stacked up against the prequels. That then branched out to ranking the movies in other movie franchises, and somehow now they were talking about trashy reality television shows Helga only watched because of how cringey they were. That was ten minutes ago, and Helga had left to go for dinner at Phoebe’s place along with Eugene. She seemed to be looking forward to a homecooked meal apparently. Mrs Heyerdahl apparently made a great roast with roast potatoes and butter.

“- and so we need to be there to cover the entire fair, just a few shots, take a few videos of people
here and there, do a talk for Instastories live or something, and it should be fine…Arnold. Arnold? You listening?"

Arnold shook himself out of his thoughts and made assenting nods that yes, he was indeed listening and he had heard every single bit of what Gerald had said, no problems, yeap.

“I knew I could count on you!” Gerald grinned. His phone buzzed and he pulled it out of his jeans pocket to look at his notifications. “Aw fuck, what’s Rhonda mad at now? Arnold, I have to take this, can you go start dinner? We still have that fried rice left, and we could eat it with some pork patties we have in the freezer.” He said all that, while standing up to make a phone call to Rhonda. “Hey Rhonda, what did Tim do now?” he said, all while making gestures along the line of, “I’ll talk to you about this during food, I swear to god Rhonda makes me want to rip things.” How he had managed to convey that with his face and hands, Arnold didn’t know.

Arnold decided to not let this new change of events be something to avoid. He should be able to talk to Helga and make friendly conversation as friends without being too weird about it.

Right?

“Helga, sweetie, it’s been ages since we last saw you!” cried Reba Heyerdahl, enveloping the blonde woman in a hug. Her red hair was fading and had more streaks of grey than red, but she still had the same jovial, loving spirit that Helga remembered.

“Thanks, Mrs Heyerdahl.” Helga gasped out. While she appreciated hugs, Reba was hugging her a lot tighter than she expected. Phoebe smiled at them.

Kyo Heyerdahl was a little more reserved in his greeting, but he still stood up to give Helga a hug. He looked the same: trim, neat, and his moustache was salt and pepper to match his hair. Considering the fact that Kyo was a man in his 60s, he stood up straight, with no stooping. Big Bob was the same, but Kyo had a regal elegance to his posture, while Big Bob Pataki stood with the aggressive stance of a brawler. It was so strange to see the differences between the two men, two very different fathers.

Phoebe hugged her parents too and took off her coat. “And we’ve brought Eugene!” she said, all while presenting the redhead in his mink coat. Reba squealed, in the same manner Phoebe did when excited, and hugged the young man in a turtleneck.

"Hi, thank you for inviting me to your home!” Eugene said and Reba beamed. Kyo walked over to give Eugene a clap on the back. Both him and Reba had met Eugene: Eugene had, numerous times, accidentally fell over and ended up in the hospital Kyo worked at, where he was chief of surgery. Later when Eugene had become the victim of bullying and beatings by bullies who snarled at the sniff of anything less than their version of masculinity, the redheaded teenager ended up at the A& E more often than usual, and that got Dr Heyerdahl a little concerned, especially since the subject was someone his daughter had hung out with when she was young.

After finally getting the truth out from the redhead, Dr Kyo spearheaded a campaign of anti-bullying and created an LGBTQ-Straight alliance in Hillwood. He also helped Eugene come out to his parents, and while there was a very short misunderstanding of who Kyo Heyerdahl was (In short, the Horowitzes were under the impression Kyo was Eugene’s sugar daddy and were more dismayed that
Eugene could have been in a relationship with a full grown adult that could be grooming him for nefarious purposes), their love towards their son was still strong, and hadn’t shattered any illusions that they had for Eugene. The young man never forgot what the Heyerdahls did for him, and him, along with Helga, had a long-standing invite to the Heyerdahl’s homestead whenever they wanted.

Reba gestured at them both to sit with Kyo in the dining room, while she and Phoebe finished up the last of the dishes to be brought over to the table. Helga protested, and so did Eugene, but Reba was adamant, and refused to let them help her. The two then sat with Kyo at the table, where he interrogated Eugene on his drag career and what he was planning to do for upcoming performances. Eugene gave him the specifics, and presented Kyo and his wife with tickets to his next gig tomorrow, at a bar downtown. Reba and Kyo were absolutely delighted, of course, and Kyo promised to wear some of the t-shirts he had long received from Eugene in the past. All were ecstatic.

” So Helga!” Reba asked as she finally sat down to start piling her plate with food. “ Tell us all about what’s been going on! How’s the convention going? How are your books? What’s going to happen to Josh and Eric in the next Our Gang series, and will Emma ever be brave about her feelings for Eric, and are you ever going to let us know what happens in the books-”

” Reb, darling, you’re doing it again.” Kyo scolded gently.

” Well, I can’t help it! Helga’s books are amazing, and so many little kids and parents have been requesting more of them in the libraries, it’s almost a mob!” Reba protested. Reba’s work in the library meant that she always scouted out good books for small kids, and loved doing it. When the first of Our Gang started appearing on the websites as Helga’s debut book series, Reba called Helga up, yelled at her a few minutes for not telling her about her book debut, and then lovingly told Helga that she was very proud of her, and that she would review the book to see if it was good for the Hillwood Public Library. Needless to say, Helga’s books started appearing on the shelves there, small children loved Helga’s books, and Reba always got Advanced Reader’s Copies of the books for her to look at and read before others did. Helga even dedicated a book to her thanks to her constant support and love for Helga’s books.

Helga laughed, very embarrassed and a little bit proud that Reba showed so much love for her work. “ Thanks, Mrs Heyerdahl-”

” I keep telling you, call me Reba.” the redheaded woman rebuked her gently.

Helga ducked her head, “ Sorry Reba.”

Reba simply laughed and spooned more roast potatoes on to Helga’s plate.

It was very weird to be sitting around a table talking lovingly and being proud of the people around you instead of imposing a hell load of expectation and near threats while eating food. Helga was used to that but was less used to a family just being there for each other no matter who or what they were. The Heyerdahls were a normal she just wasn’t used to.

Also, if someone told nine-year-old Helga that she would one day have a lovely family dinner with the Heyerdahls, and Eugene was there? Little Helga would have yelled at them to shut up and fuck off. Now? It was just nice. She hadn’t had a good home-cooked meal in ages, and Reba was the closest thing she had to a mom.

Well, besides Alyssa Shennel, who was Eugene’s drag mother and adopted Helga as one of her drag kids, but that wasn’t the point. She had learnt about getting proper results from Kyo more than she
ever did from Big Bob.

The point was, as Helga happily chatted with Reba about the latest books that were coming into the library, Eugene and Kyo debated the good and bad of wearing heels while dancing and Phoebe contributed to either when she could, Helga was actually feeling the happiest she had ever felt in a long while. Her life so far was great, but sitting down in a family dinner with people she loved? She was missing that. She had to consider that perhaps one day, it would be great to sit down with a family and catch up, and express joy, heartache, pain and maybe even love. To tell them about her day without any sort of extreme expectations, and no one telling her off for being hardheaded and stubborn.

"Helga, sweetie, you gotta help me." Reba said, now drawing her attention. The older woman was gesturing with her fork wildly. "Now I know my baby girl has no time raising a family and all, but can you help me convince her to at least go out and meet someone? I think she hasn’t met anyone since she started work at the hospital, but would it kill her to go out on a date once in awhile, just for her poor mama so I won’t get so worried about her not making friends?"

Phoebe buried her red face in embarrassment, Helga just laughed.

Saturday burned bright and early for Helga. While she was getting ready for a whole new day of signing, she was also there for a convention panel on Female Heroes in Comics, and frankly, she was panicked. Who on earth would want her opinions on anything book related, especially in graphic novels? She was practically a novice, despite having two graphic novels under her belt and a series of children’s books behind her.

Telling those anxieties to both Phoebe and Patty who were there for the morning was a little futile.

"What are you talking about, blondie?" Patty stared at her like she was crazy. "You’re a great writer, little kids love you, and I bought tons of your books for office Secret Santas, and all the people love them. Except for Greg, but he’s shit, no one likes Greg."

Helga turned to Phoebe, who was looking at her sternly. "We’ve talked about this, Helga. You’re a great writer. You’ve had several books out considering that you’re 29. People love your work, and my mom sends you copies of reviews she sees in the newspapers. If all your work was based on fluke, you must be the luckiest white girl ever." This was all said while Phoebe was wielding a prop replica of a sword, and Helga felt it was wise not to interrupt for fear of dismemberment.

Phoebe had a point. In some strange part of her, she knew she was good with words, there was no doubt about it when she was young and started writing about her feelings about Arnold in little pink journals she didn’t choose out of her own volition. When she got older, she continued writing, first in journals and notebooks that she finally got a chance to choose; then on her laptop that Big Bob gave her for her 15th birthday that was one of the few things she took with her when she finally left and kept on running after 7 years of use.

She knew she was getting better at writing, and the fact that she could even make a living with her writing made it some sort of a miracle. But at the same time, she remembered days when she got hungry, from her childhood days when Miriam didn’t pack her lunches, and when she was a college student and making it on her own without any parental support from Big Bob or Olga. Then, she was only able to afford one meal a day, and had to either invite herself over to the homes of her more affluent friends or do emcee gigs at queer clubs in order to eat. She still had the rather horrible gastric pains and acid reflux to show for it, and then flared up in the most inopportune of times.
All that meant that she kept herself working and pushing forward so she never had to think about those days, and the graphic novel gig was amazing because it meant a steady paycheck and she could afford food for a good amount of time.

But it could go away any minute, she knew that. Maybe one day she would lose the plot, literally, and she wouldn’t be able to support herself writing anymore.

She sometimes had the feeling of gnawing hunger that got her at night, even though she knew she could afford food. It was less actual hunger and more habit. So it was very important that she kept herself working no matter what, and she kept asking the people around her if her work was getting better.

When she felt she wasn’t getting an honest answer, she sometimes trawled the internet reviews under an assumed name. It was not healthy, and she rarely did it these days, but she couldn’t resist it sometimes.

Luckily, her friends distracted her in the best of ways.

"So food?" Patty asked.

“Food.” Helga replied. She never refused food when she could get it. She pushed back the dark thoughts of her hungry days, Helga turned back to Phoebe and Patty with a smile. “I saw a food truck that makes mac n cheese from scratch, let’s get that one.”

The two other women agreed and made their way to the food truck.

Earlier, the food truck had been swarming with people but was now in a bit of a lull after the breakfast rush. The service people were at the moment filling up cups of coffee for two people wearing exhibitor’s lanyards, looking tired but smiling.

One of the staff members, her brown hair tied up in a ponytail while wearing cat ears, turned to smile at the three approaching her truck. “Well, hi, what can I do you for?”

The three women poured over the menu and made their selection. The service member took down their orders and left to get them. Helga gave a little shiver and wrapped her suit jacket tighter around herself. It may have been early, but it was getting a little cold. The outfit did not offer that much insulation. She figured she would have to get something warmer for tomorrow.

The service member came back with the orders, and as she passed it over to Helga, who was desperate to get something warm and passing it over to the others, their fingers touched and the counter staff giggled and blushed at Helga, who blinked a little but decided to forget about it.

Phoebe caught the interaction and laughed. Patty saw it and smiled approvingly.

“That girl was into you, Jezebel,” Patty whispered to Helga as they brought their cartons to an open picnic table and bench. It was a nickname Patty used to give Helga, first when they were still trading barbs and hateful insults, then later as a term of endearment. Helga thought it was kinda sweet and similar to Eugene’s “Hell-Girl”. Phoebe sometimes referred to her as Aii, from that anime they both saw with the same name.

Helga laughed, mostly in disbelief. “Great story, Patty.” No way would people actually think she was that good looking. She wasn’t that kind of person.
Patty rolled her eyes but then decided to drop it. “So, Jezebel, ready for the discussion panel?”

Helga nodded, shovelling a mouthful of mac and cheese into her mouth. Damn, she was hungrier than she thought. Phoebe winced a little at the way Helga was eating, but Patty merely raised an eyebrow.

The blonde swallowed her food and started waving her spoon around. “I think I got it yesterday— I wanted to start talking about superheroes but then figured it would make sense for the Marvel writer to do that instead since she’s going to specialise on it. Luckily, Arnold brought up a really good point about how people kept criticising the female heroes in the Evil Twin franchise, so I decided to focus my perspective of gothic horror stories and flawed female heroes and linking it to Umbrella Girl—”

Patty raised her other eyebrow but remained silent. This continued until Helga took out her phone, about to show the two other women her thought process and flow of thinking. Swiping open her screen, she clicked open her notes app and then started scrolling about, showing the bits and pieces she lifted from her chat with Arnold, and the annotations she made at the side that she thought were useful and interesting.

Phoebe oohed and aahed over the flowcharts, while Patty asked, “How are you and Arnold doing, anyway?”

That was a bit of a weird question to ask, considering they only reconnected three days ago, but Helga decided to roll with it. “We’re good?” And yes, phrasing that sentence as a question made sense in this context.

Patty leaned back in her chair. “You both seem really chummy, considering the fact that you two only reconnected three days ago. I was just wondering.”

Helga had eaten another spoonful of mac and cheese and chewed thoughtfully, only laughing at the end. “Please. The man turns out to be interested in the Evil Twin Franchise, which you know I am a sucker for, and then he and I started discussing the Marvel movies. Do you know how rare it is for someone to be that interested in the Marvel stuff? Also, Patty, you should game with him, he likes that game you like, that … UnderTell? Fucking hell, what was it?”

“Do you mean UnderTale?” Patty asked patiently. Sometimes Helga got the name of games wrong.

”No no…Over…Look?” Helga hazarded another guess.

”Overwatch.” Patty nodded understandingly. “I can see why. Great game.”

“I must admit, Patty has a point,” Phoebe said, still not looking up from Helga’s phone. Goodness, was she… editing Helga’s annotations? “While it is understandable that you and Arnold are catching up, you and him seem to be chatting a lot. I have never seen you text that much, even with me or Eugene. Yesterday, when we were walking to the bar to get to Eugene’s gig rehearsal, you were looking down at your phone so much that I had to steer you away from 3 human obstacles, 2 furniture related near accidents, and even you walking into the stage a few times. Even then, you stepped on the bouncer a few times and it’s a good thing he cried instead of kicking you out.”

Helga didn’t remember that. Damn. The poor bouncer was adorable too with his soft-spoken Kiwi accent despite his big, burly frame.

”And you’ve only seen each other…once?” Phoebe continued. “It’s a little unusual to be talking to
someone like this, especially considering your past history with him, and the fact that you tend to go a little too hard too fast when it comes to relationships.”

Wait, what?

”Woah, woah woah!” Helga yelled, nearly flailing out of her seat. “Let me get this straight. You think I still have a thing for Arnold?”

Patty and Phoebe looked at each other and nodded.

This was getting out of hand. Of course she didn’t have a crush on Arnold anymore, it was ages ago, for crying out loud. She and him were genuinely having a great time, why were her friends doing this? This wasn’t good at all. She and Arnold were friends. FRIENDS. She was not like Rachel Green, and Arnold was not Ross Gellar. She hated them. The whole Friends concept was kinda shitty anyway, what were they even?

She figured getting mad at her friends was not a good idea, and decided to go the zen route, one she used when she was about to perform a speech on stage. “Guys, guys? I appreciate what you guys are doing, but trust me, Arnold and I? Not getting together. He and I are good friends. I promise. In fact-” she brightened up, a good idea having struck her. “After this, I promise you both, I will get myself out there and start talking to people, and date more often. I am not going to be obsessed with him again, and we are good friends. Same as you both and me. You can help vet through my dates and set me up, even.”

Both Phoebe and Patty were looking a little more relieved, and Helga was convinced she was doing pretty good convincing them that everything was good.

Until Patty wrinkled her forehead, frowning. “Ah, crap. The only single person I know is Greg.”

Helga thought that Greg was not a good person to get set up with, and silently hoped she would never have to date him.

She might consider flirting with the cute counter lunch girl instead. Since she was going to get back into the market, it made sense to start practicing how to flirt again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the messages, I saw them when I was away but did not reply because I was feeling absolutely guilty about having no chapter to gift back. Rest assured I have indeed read them and will get back to you on them.

I also have one instance of fanart. This is a rare occurrence for me, I have never gotten fanart for my work before. I will check with OP if she is okay with me posting the link.

It's really rather good.
As someone who had never been to the Hillwood Comic Convention, the entire place was nearly overwhelming Arnold with the bright lights and the masses of people, dressed in outfits from various pop culture elements.

Standing there with Gerald and another colleague of his, a small guy that Gerald introduced as Tim, who was a producer and a decent sound guy apparently, Arnold was beginning to feel a little excited and scared.

He could recognize some of the outfits the cosplayers were wearing, dressed in outfits from some games he played, and some of the stuff the kids in his class liked. He didn’t recognise swaths of others, and Gerald had to explain some of the references to him when they walked to the media booth, collecting media passes for the whole group in question. The entire place swarmed with people, which made sense since it was a Saturday, and finding the media booth was a little difficult, but workable. The teenage girl who was manning the table looked a little hassled and had passed the lanyards and passes without a smile.

Most of the media had already collected their passes on Thursday, since they were covering all 4 days of the event. TalkBuzz didn’t because apparently, Rhonda felt it made more sense to do the weekend spots, where more people were available and more panels were ongoing so that there was a chance of more material. That seemed a little flawed somehow, but he was only here to do the filming, not criticise the policies and decisions made at TalkBuzz.

Tim didn’t talk much, as far as Arnold noticed, focusing on making sure the sound levels from Gerald’s microphone were holding steady. Another producer was running around trying to make sure the light was good for some shots, and they seemed a little cranky. Gerald had introduced the producer as Sam, and Sam seemed more interested in barking orders and criticising lighting choices than making small chitchat with Arnold.

That didn’t faze Arnold. He knew he was rather adequate in the video shooting area, and he could roll with the punches most of the time. There was a reason he had won a, “Most Agreeable Person Ever” award back in college.

(It was a joke award, he won it at a party. Rhonda had given it to him. He thought it was quite annoying but decided it wouldn’t be cool yelling at Rhonda. He wondered if it meant he was being agreeable.)

He followed them around, fiddling with the video camera and getting some pretty good video footage of the convention. Gerald was always a natural in front of the camera, and Arnold was glad that for once, he was helping to support his best friend on the projects he wanted to do instead of a crusade that Arnold was involved with. Gerald had worked hard at cinema studies in college and wanted to become a great director. This was a stepping stone in the right direction, Gerald had always reassured him.

Arnold turned the camera over to face Gerald, who was currently whipping his phone out and making faces at it, turning this way and that to figure out his angles. He had to roll his eyes at that, because damn, sometimes Gerald could be self-absorbed.

Then again, he couldn’t fault Gerald for that. Tall, dark-skinned and handsome, the man had a charisma that played well to cameras and a face that was meant to smirk, laugh, or smile. It helped
bring in views for his videos and made him popular with fans. It was one of his great qualities, besides the man's own kindness and generosity. The man was meant to be in front of the camera. The fact that he wanted to make good with that sort of ability just made him amazing. If Arnold were more interested in men, he figured he and Gerald would be married.

So they wouldn't have sex.

Maybe he should rethink this.

Gerald had now stopped preening in front of his front camera and was currently scrolling through his phone. “Okay, so I just got word we have permission to video the cosplay contest, Vinnie MacDonald’s booth, and a panel discussion on Female Heroes or something, so that means we have to sit in on that. Arnold, you will have to help me set up the camera for that, and Sam, I need you to man the Instagram so we can film the entire program. Tim-” here Gerald hesitated. “Tim, you just do Tim, okay?”

Tim, with his oversized headphones, nodded, apparently used to doing Tim.

“Great, so Arnold, you’re with me, okay?” Gerald turned directly over to Arnold. Arnold gave Gerald a thumbs up with his free hand as a reply. Gerald nodded. “Good man! I need you to follow me and film stuff, same as how we did the last video. We need good shots of the nerds, the cheering cosplayers, maybe film a few authors signing things…whaddya think?”

“It’s your video, Gerald.”

“Yeah, but you’re my friend. I like your opinions on things.”

Arnold thought for a bit. “Seems like a great idea.”

His best friend grinned. The two of them touched fists and wriggled their thumbs, less a buddy handshake and more a sacred ritual between two best friends, and they were on their way.

Geek culture was a bit flashier than Arnold had realised.

While he got along with all people of all crowds in school, geek culture was something he never particularly got into. He and Gerald were in a band at some point, and Arnold and Gerald spent a lot of time playing instruments. Arnold was heavily into bass guitar at the time, while Gerald liked composing music on keyboard and drums. Both wrote songs, and Arnold still winced a little when he thought back to that time. The songs could only be best described as, “Emo Trash Lord Dark Sadness Poetry.”

When the most popular genres of the 2000s were emo-pop and angry, introspective raps, it was somewhat understandable. But the songs were just pretty bad.

The point was, Arnold had spent a lot of time playing music and getting involved in school, various causes, and spending time with Gerald and friends. He hadn’t had much opportunity to spend time with the nerdery-inclined, and while Curly (who went by Thaddeus in middle school, Gammel the Grey in high school, and Gammelgamer on the message boards) had invited him to join his Dungeons and Dragons group, Arnold had declined politely. Curly (who went simply by Thad now), had shrugged and went on his way.

(Arnold didn’t see Thad for a while until he started playing Call of Duty with Gerald. There, they bumped into Thad in game when the man blew up his own tank on purpose to get as many dead
soldiers as possible, no matter which side they were on. They gamed a lot ever since.)

So when he first stepped into the hall Gerald wanted to go into, which was featuring the semi-finals of the cosplay competition, he was feeling a little out of his element.

He and the team were sitting in one of the halls, where a stage was set up for the cosplay contest, and was filled up with 10 eager contestants here to compete for the main prize, which seemed to be $500, and a chance to compete in another cosplay contest in one of the bigger conventions. Arnold thought it was a rather weird prize for a competition that was essentially about who wore what outfit better.

Gerald had laughed in his face when Arnold brought it up before the event started. “Man, you really don’t know much.” He laughed. “Cosplay ain’t about who looks better, or who embodies the costume better.”

He paused on that, and corrected himself. “My bad, sorry. It can be about embodying the costume and the outfit. But it’s mostly about love. These people—here, he gestured towards the crowds of fans behind him. “—are people who love pop culture, because it’s all stuff that has helped them through tough moments of their life, or stuff that they grew up with. It doesn’t matter what or who they are. Fans are fans, and cosplayers are fans who take the step a bit further, embodying the people who are their heroes. Some of them do it with friends, and they cosplay as a group. Some go alone, and make friends with people who take photos with them. Many learn great skills making props, or sewing costumes, just so they can. And all so that they can show their dedication and love for a particular fandom. Cosplay competitions is a mixture of acting, skill, creativity, and even good script writing.”

Arnold didn’t believe him at first. But now, as the Iron Man cosplayer raised his hand in the iconic Iron Man pose and the gauntlet flexed and moved exactly like how it did in the movie, all while making the loud, technological sounds, Arnold was fascinated. These cosplayers were amazing! How on earth did they even make armour? He figured he would ask Gerald about it later.

“Let’s give it up for Iron Man, as portrayed by contestant 15, Deraynious!” announced the emcee, and Arnold, who had set up a tripod next to him, made sure the lens was holding steady and still facing the stage. A petite Asian girl walked in, twirling the gun umbrella that the character Laila had wielded, and struck a pose.

Damn, Helga would like this. Arnold thought. He snuck his phone out from his pocket, raised it up and snapped a pic. Gerald glanced over at him, but didn’t comment.

Arnold opened up his message app and sent the picture to Helga. A few minutes later, as the cosplayer ChibiAngela skipped off stage, he heard his phone buzz. He could see Gerald now frowning next to him, but he didn’t raise a fuss as Arnold opened his phone to see Helga’s message.

Holy criminy fuckrabbits, that’s the best Laila I’ve seen!

He grinned as he typed back, I thought you might like it

fo real tho, it’s like really amazing. where did you get this?

He was about to reply when Gerald, who also had his phone out, nudged him in the shoulder. Arnold looked down at the phone screen.
Arnold, confused, looked at Gerald, who was gesturing at the camera next to him. The camera that
could pick up sound, including vibrations from phones that could fuck up with the audio from the
camera. The one that he was currently sitting next to.

Whoops.

The blonde man sheepishly went to switch his notification alert to silent.

Gerald looked a bit gratified, but he still looked grumpy about his normally pretty considerate friend
nearly ruining his shot. Arnold decided to look innocent and keep his eye on the video camera to
make sure nothing else was ruined.

Gerald, to his credit, only yelled at Arnold when the cosplay competition was over and he had
marched Arnold by the arm over to a slightly quieter area of the hall.

“DUDE, YOU KNOW BETTER THAN THIS.” Gerald yelled, running a hand through his shortly
cropped hair. “Keep the phone on silent! That was a really great shot of Umbrella Girl, and she won
second! We could have used most of the shot in edit for the finished video!”

Arnold, who was looking plenty abashed, went, “Sorry G.”

Gerald sighed, most of his anger gone. “Man, you’re lucky we’re great friends and it was a few
seconds of it. We managed to get the rest of the cosplay competition, no biggie.”

He turned to look at his friend, “Just…man. Be careful next time!” he chided the blonde man. Both
men were quiet for a bit before Gerald looked up, “Is it related to that embarrassing text thingy you
were talking about yesterday?”

Arnold, who didn’t really know how else to reply, nodded.

Gerald sighed. And then laughed. “Mannnnn, whoever this person is you’re having these texting
storms with, you must be really into her.” He then looked a little concerned. “Aw hell no, is it that
Fifty Shades woman?!”

The look on his best friend’s face just made him laugh more.

“Dude, just well, make sure you don’t do that again, haha!” Gerald slapped his friend on the back.
"Sorry, I may have overreacted a little, it’s just…I’m dying to know, man! Who are you texting? Is
she cute? Where does she live? What does she look like?”

Arnold hesitated. What could he tell Gerald that wouldn’t be too revealing? “It’s barely a thing
man…she’s not interested in me. We’re just talking.”

“Okay, I’m calling lie on that,” Gerald declared. “You only talk to people that much when you are
very interested in them, especially when you grin and your eyes light up like that.” A look crossed
his face and Gerald dramatically pointed a finger at Arnold, “Holy crap, I knew it!”

Arnold froze.

“You’re in love with Nadine, aren’t you?”
What.

“Dude-”

“Fucking hell, it makes sense now!”

“Dude-”

“You and her hang out all the time!”

“We’re work colleagues, we work in the same school together-”

“You always have stuff of hers lying around the house-”

“She forces them on me and makes me try them-”

“She proposed to you a few times in school! I was there when she did it once!”

“Okay, it’s an inside joke, she hates students unwilling to learn, I get annoyed when children tell me that,”Bougie” is a term that’s okay to use in an English essay, she jokes that we should run away together-”

“But dude!”

“Nadine once told me when we were hanging out at a bar once that she felt sorry that my football shaped head would put off girls, so she and I did a poll in the bar for all patrons to vote if they would date me, just based on my looks.” Arnold replied, “95% of the respondents said yes, except for two: Nadine, and that bartender who had that football accident when he was 2 and wouldn’t touch a football for fear of a breakdown. Trust me, she is not interested. She’s been laughing at my ass this whole week. Her snake is on to it as well.”

Gerald absorbed the long revelation and bonus survey results with amazing aplomb. “Okay, then… who else could it–”

It was like a lightbulb had finally smacked Gerald in the face. Or the truth had flashed itself on, Arnold couldn’t tell, he was messing his metaphors up. All he knew was that Gerald, wide-eyed, was looking at him with something akin to awe, understanding, and shock. “NO.”

Arnold was panicking now, “Dude-”

“Holy shitsnacks-”

“Gerald, listen-”

“You cannot be telling me you have a thing for Helga G. Pataki!”

There it was, out in the open. Judging by Gerald’s face, he must have seen the confirmation in Arnold’s face. He knew.

Arnold braced himself for the inevitable rant.

What he got instead was Gerald grinning widely, his eyes lit up and dancing. “Holy shit, it is her! Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!”

Gerald was not his best friend anymore. The tall black man, who was well-built, handsome, and usually had an air of debonair charm, was now actually jumping in absolute glee. It felt even worse
than if Gerald had started ranting in anger. It was absolutely unbecoming but Arnold knew it was the way Gerald celebrated things, whether it be a win from his favourite basketball team, when he managed to raise his gaming wins. Gerald danced like he was in an 80s aerobics video.

Standing still waiting for his absolutely evil ex-best friend stop dancing to his misery, Arnold decided that he would murder Gerald in his sleep tonight. It was definitely do-able. He knew where the man lived, after all.

Gerald finally got his dance winded down, and bent over, still laughing, he grabbed the resigned blonde man by the shoulders. “Arnold, my man, you are the boldest, bravest, most amazing man I have ever been friends with.”

“Mmmph,” was the only sound Arnold made to that statement.

“Millions of dudes would think you were nuts.”

“Plmpth.”

“I think you are out of your mind, and you’re my favourite cracker.”

“Blep.”

“I think you and her would do great.”

That startled Arnold out of his monosyllabic gibberish replies. “Say what now.”

Gerald smirked, “What, you thought I was going to talk you out of it?”

“Well, yeah,” Arnold replied in a small voice. “Helga is…”

He trailed off, not knowing what else he could say.

“Helga G Pataki is always going to be Helga G Pataki.” Gerald declared. “She was a bully, perhaps. She made you feel horrible about yourself. She also helped Phoebe stand up for herself when those doctors were being shitty towards her. She also fought Eugene’s shitty attackers in college, and made every bit of college life better for him. Phoebe never talked much about Helga, but when she did, it was always something she did that was amazing. Helga Pataki is the same girl she has been since elementary school, but she is also a better version of the same girl, and has learnt from her mistakes. She was with us during the San Lorenzo trip, remember? She was angry at you. She made you feel responsible for your mistakes. Yet she also convinced me and Phoebe to help you, and she could have abandoned us during any part of the jungle. If anything, Helga Pataki is a loyal son of a bitch, and if you say you like her, I will say, ‘Go for it.’ She’s cool.”

If Gerald thought that it was a bit out of character for his best friend to hug him very tightly afterwards, he didn’t say a word. He figured his best friend needed it.

Helga frowned a little when she didn’t get a message back from Arnold after an hour. The man was usually pretty prompt with messages, and she really did want to find out where he got the photo from. Was there another cosplaying event happening that she didn’t know about?

She couldn’t dwell on the subject any longer, as now Fran, who had turned up at some point in another immaculate, flashy outfit and heels so high they could have been on drugs, was now pushing her over to talk to the moderator of the panel discussion, alongside the other writers that were featured in the discussion. Helga had met one of the Writers before, a lovely writer and artist who...
posted an ongoing series about Monster girls, but hadn’t met the other two. She gave the writer she recognised a wave, who waved back, and shook hands with the other two, a portly man whose name she vaguely recognised as the author of a very long graphic novel about warring kingdoms, and another writer who she vaguely knew was the Marvel superhero writer.

They all made small talk in their little groups, while their agents, who were all there, took the opportunity to network and raise their profiles. It was similar to parents in playgroup who were watching their little kids play together, and trying to one up the other on accomplishments.

“Well, my client Helga Pataki has managed to make New York’s Bestsellers list many times all by herself.” She could hear Fran brag. “And can you believe it, she’s under 30 and still single? I swear, if you have any thing you want her to write about, she could do an-ny-thing-”

Oh god why did it seem like Fran was pimping her out like a show horse? Helga winced.

“Your agent is very ...persuasive!” Quipped the writer that Helga knew.

“I mean, I totally love her, but mannnnn.” Helga grumbled, causing the other writer to giggle, and making Helga smile in spite of herself. “How’s the girlfriend, Noelle?”

“Same old.” The writer shrugged. “We’re considering getting a cat, but we’re now arguing about cat names, and getting the room ready for the cat to sleep in, and Tessa wants to make a cat patio.”

Helga laughed. She had always wanted a cat, having pictured herself living in a romantic Parisian apartment, wearing berets and striped tops and writing while a Persian cat twined itself around her ankles. But when she stopped being 18 and realised that she could be a writer no matter where she was, she gave up on the Paris dream, only keeping the cat part. It didn’t help that currently, she was also living with a drag queen roommate who was allergic to a lot of animals, including, unfortunately, cats. Helga figured she could probably get one when she moved out of the apartment, but then again, she really loved rooming with Eugene and wouldn’t trade it for anything else. “I’m sure Tessa would calm down a bit once you get the cat, Noelle.”

They shrugged, “Perhaps. We’re looking into a few rescue kittens, but I do want to consider older cats-”

“You should go to someone I know!” That was the Marvel writer, who had blurted it out and started blushing when both Helga and Noelle turned to look at her, a flush vaguely discernible from her tan skin. “Sorry, it’s just- I love cats, and there’s someone I know who rescues kittens and older cats for a living, and she helped me adopt my Shiraz.”

“I too know someone who rescues cats.” Said the male writer, who had overheard the conversation. His light, conversational voice did not seem to match his big size. “My neighbour Melinda works with an animal Organization, and they are always in need of adopters-”

This vein of conversation would have continued on for another hour or so if they hadn’t been stopped. They managed a good ten minutes talking about cat adoptions and cat toys before the moderator, a rather tall, bland man, had interrupted them, and told them they had to stop talking about cats and maybe start talking about who should go first in the panel discussion.

The writers merely grinned at each other when the moderator turned away. If they ran out of topics, at least they would still have cats to discuss. That was something they all agreed with.
Arnold and Gerald were now standing outside a convention hall, watching Sam and Tim fight over...something.

Considering the fact that he had heard stories from Gerald about how Tim was usually a rather neurotic, boring man who went on and on about subjects that never really went anywhere, he was rather surprised to see Tim fire a very sharp insult at Sam, who returned back with an angry retort about Tim’s oatmeal face. It was rather childish and weird.

"So you’re saying these two have a thing for each other?" asked Arnold, staring wide-eyed in disbelief at the two people now yelling at each other about socks.

Gerald, who seemed to be more used to this, replied, “Yeap.” He was now scrolling through his own messages, entirely bored of their fighting. “We don’t question it anymore. I just want them to fuck it out but well…”

They made a rather odd couple, Arnold thought. Sam, who was taller than Tim, had hair buzzed close to the scalp on the left, and dyed the remaining shoulder length hair a deep turquoise. They were dressed in a shirt covered with jellyfish, and wore gold, rimmed glasses with circular rims, along with badges that declared they were part of the queer mafia. Tim, in contrast, was dressed in a polo shirt and old, frayed, cargo shorts, and had brown, shaggy hair and thick black glasses. Where Sam was flashy, angry and quick, and bristled, Tim was mild, bland and rather boring. A hipster and a tech nerd. It was like fire and ice.

But then again, Arnold reasoned, couples could happen no matter what and how.

Gerald, who had pocketed his phone, finally turned to yell at the both of them to shut up, and to pack up, they had to set up for the panel discussion they were supposed to be at 5 minutes ago. Both Sam and Tim stopped fighting, but both were unhappy about it. All four trudged off to the hall the panel discussion was supposed to be held at.

Considering the fact that Arnold had spent the past few days exchanging texts with Helga, it had only hit him then that Helga would be participating in this one. She had mentioned that she felt a bit nervous about the entire thing, and Arnold had sympathised. She bounced off a few ideas off him, and he figured that she must have gotten some decent ideas, because she seemed to spend the rest of the evening coming up with notes and ideas on her phone. He wasn’t too sure about it.

A bit nervous about how it was to see someone he clearly had a crush on so unexpectedly, he would have fretted a bit more if it were not for two things:

1) Gerald, who had taken one look at the program and saw the names of the participating writers, and one look at Arnold, and started snickering behind his hand.

2) They had entered the open hall which was empty but filling up fast, and two figures, sitting closest to the back of the hall, had turned around upon hearing the doors open and had turned to look at the new entrants. The two figures were familiar to both Gerald and Arnold.

"Gerald, and -Arnold? What a pleasant surprise!" That was Phoebe, who had dropped her phone upon seeing the two men. Gerald, who was still snickering, had started turning his laugh into a coughing fit the moment he saw his ex.

“Hey Phoebe,” Arnold greeted, pushing down his nervousness. He turned towards the taller figure
and mustered a smile, “Hey Patty. Helga mentioned you were in town.”

Patty looked back at Arnold with a smile. “She did. She also mentioned she saw you.”

Arnold’s heart gave a little squee upon knowing that Helga had talked about him and tried to stop himself from smiling automatically, but he might have failed as Patty’s eyes narrowed a little, tilting her head questioningly. Thankfully, Gerald saved the day by turning on the Johansson Charm.

He flashed a smile at Patty. “Hey girl, loving the arms. Where and how do you work out?”

Patty smirked. “Anywhere I can, and plenty. I see you’re not too bad yourself.”

“I could use a little more muscle tone. Tell me your ways!”

“I could, but only if-”

Arnold turned back to look at Phoebe, who was glancing at him with a smile. “What brings you here to the convention, Arnold?” asked Phoebe, watching as Patty started demonstrating moves for Gerald to try out later at the gym. “I know Gerald had to film stuff here, but I didn’t know you were interested in this too.”

Arnold gestured towards the camera he was holding. “Gerald’s camera guy had to drop out, so I subbed in.”

Phoebe nodded in understanding.

Gerald and Arnold excused themselves after a minute because they had to set up, and as they left, Arnold noticed Patty whispering something fiercely to Phoebe, who giggled and whispered something back.

He decided not to dwell too much on the matter. He was here to work after all. Crush on Helga or not, he was here to help his best friend who had shown him tons of support, and that was the only thing that mattered.
THIS CHAPTER WAS MEANT TO COVER OTHER THINGS.

AND THEN IT SPIRALLED.

THERE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE MORE ARNOLD/HELGA MOMENTS.

WHY DID IT SPIRAL

Panel discussions during conventions were one thing Helga both loved and hated.

As someone who had a lot of issues with what she termed as bullshit, and always looking for the loopholes to work around so that she could get her way, Helga was very interested- and as a result very good- at questioning things. This was annoying to a few parties: Helga’s teachers in middle school, Big Bob and Miriam Pataki, and the counsellor that the school sent her to that was nothing like Dr Bliss.

This was however great because of two people: Helga’s English teacher, who had made her class do a debate once and was so impressed with Helga’s arguments that she convinced the girl one day to consider staying back and becoming part of the debate team. Helga was only convinced when the teacher added that it meant she didn’t have to go back home immediately after school, her burgeoning writing skills could use a challenge since she was pretty adept at narrative, but weaker on characterization and debate would help her write things from people’s perspectives better, and lastly it would look great on her transcript. Helga agreed, went to her first debate team meeting, picked a fight with all the members and nearly gave up on the idea of debating.

The second person who was impressed with Helga’s rather inquisitive nature and her balls to question things was a fellow student who was also in debate. Nilanjana had often admired Helga from afar and was secretly gleeful when Helga joined the debate team. After the rather angry Helga left the first meeting, Nilanjana was so upset that she ran out after her, told Helga that she really wished she would give debate another chance, and told her in a rush that she thought Helga made good points, but it could use some refinement, and if she was willing to let her help, Helga could make a formidable debater.

Helga, still upset, was about to tell Nilanjana off, but then in a split second decided not to. The other girl was trembling from head to toe while waiting to see how Helga would respond, and somehow it reminded her of the time the sixth-graders made Phoebe feel small and used, sobbing and clutching on to Helga like a lifeline back in that dingy bathroom back in Hillwood. Nilanjana was a stocky, meek Indian girl who looked nothing like Phoebe, yet something about the earnestness of her request reminded her so much of her best friend on the opposite side of the coast. She grovelled a little and told Nilanjana she would consider the request.

At the next debate meeting, Helga walked into the room, grumpily sat down, arranged her notebook and pens, and started listening. She didn’t say a word to anyone else of the debate team. Yet Ms Chien and Nilanjana knew what her presence meant.
Helga came to every meeting afterwards and started learning how to finesse and organise her arguments better, as well as how to work on angles for each debate competition. The other debate members, seeing that Helga was sincere in debate and not fooling around, looked past the first meeting, and decided to rally around Helga. The blonde teenager herself was slowly falling in love with debate, and most of the time could be seen with Nilanjana and the other debate students, hanging out, laughing and joking.

It had been 2 years since Helga had moved from Hillwood to Miltown, and she hadn’t managed to make any friends in the time period. Her best friend was miles and miles away, and there was no way she could walk to the Sunset Arms just to talk about her feelings for Arnold. She spent that period of time alone, keeping to herself, and only talking to Phoebe on MSN Messenger. Now? She had more friends, another outlet to release her emotions besides writing and poetry, and a teacher that was on her side in school.

It was also during a debate that the idea of sexuality came up. Helga, who was still rather stuck on Arnold at the time, had scoffed at the idea of falling in love with more than one person in a lifetime, and the idea that you could have a thing for someone of the same gender as herself. This was taken to heart by a pretty debater from another school who thought Helga was a bigot, and consequently, both of them went through a messy year of arguing, pranking, and then somehow kissing, making out and then breaking up, all without actually defining what they were.

Helga still sometimes thought of Grace with affection, because Grace did help her figure out a few things about her sexuality, including that her attraction to other girls did not detract anything from her past love for Arnold, it just meant that she wasn’t heterosexual. Grace had also been the one to introduce Helga to other poets, like Dickinson, Plath, and Woolf, and exposed Helga to different types of poetry and works of art, like theatre. It was one of the reasons why Helga, who hadn’t lost her passion for the theatre even after her elementary school dabbles, decided to take on theatre studies in college.

The point was, debate was a gateway to many things: being able to be friends with people again, her burgeoning sexuality, and her major of study in university. She enjoyed listening to school debates every now and then and sometimes sat in the back of a few school debates watching little kids stand up on the podium, defending their positions and making outrageous comments.

Panel discussions in conventions were a pale imitation of that, but it did help, and it was mostly to educate and explain rather than actual debate. She could live with that.

It was, however, a little annoying when an audience member kept insisting that they knew better than the experts on the topic, especially when the topic was on FEMALE heroes.

“No, no, you’re completely missing the point—” argued a rather tall, pompous sounding, Chinese guy, who was pushing up his glasses. “How do YOU as authors argue against the idea that female heroes are inaccurate in terms of history? There aren’t black pirates in history or female Asian warriors, and clearly making them all different races and thrusting them in stories is merely wish fulfilment—“

“Okay, I have to stop you there, Vincent.” said the Marvel writer, currently pushing up her glasses and, judging by the vein pulsing in her temple, supremely pissed. “There are female Asian pirates, I suggest you Google Ching Shih, and also there have been records of black pirates ruling the seas. The fact that you are telling us this when it is clearly wrong is just a way to distract us from the actual topic we are talking about.”

Helga had to admire the patience of this woman to educate this misguided man. The only suggestion
she would have had was to find his soft googly bits and punch them.

“Exactly,” This was Noelle now, who had been clutching their bottle with pale fingers and when they spoke, their voice was nearly strangled. Helga figured that Noelle must have been really angry. “The fact of the matter is, we are dealing in comics. Panels that can take place in outer-space, in the past, in the realm of possibility that humans with the power to bend time exist, and yet we can’t create black female bisexual pirates because they, ‘don’t exist’? Frankly, that could be amazing. I’m genderqueer and believe me when I say that I would have loved the thought of a pirate like me sailing the seas, and societal norms do not apply to the seas.”

The portly male writer looked kindly at the male audience member, “Vincent, my boy? If you can ask questions like that, you should then ask yourself why it is that you are binding yourself to such restrictions when it comes to writing and creating characters. “he said. “Is it because you believe that it should mimic history in every single way? If so, you need to make sure what you are writing about is absolutely accurate. Every single aspect. Like the fact that most monarchs had dentures or every single drinking song that was ever sung about in the particular era—”

“But that’s completely impossible!” cried the man. “It wouldn’t be fiction anymore!”

“Exactly.” Rumbled the author. “We are writers who deal with fiction. Everything we write IS wish fulfilment.”

Helga, at that moment, thumped the table in a debater’s move, “Hear hear!” she cried. “I wrote Umbrella Girl because I wanted to tell a story, and the characters in it are based on people I wanted in there. If someone chooses to write a black female pirate, it’s because they WANT a black female pirate, and the author gets to choose. Not their audience, just the author.”

The man, who seemed chastised and a little defeated, returned to his seat, just as the next person jumped up. Another male nerd, Helga observed with a tinge of weariness. Hopefully, he wouldn’t be an asshole.

“Hi, this question is for all the authors?” The man asked. Helga braced herself. “It seems to me that your characters are unrealistic stereotypes of political correctness.”

Dear lord, was there a fucking need for entitled male nerds?

“Is it really necessary for the sake of popular sensibilities to have in a fantasy what we have in the real world? I mean, I read fantasy to get away from politically correct clichés, and I’m sure a lot of the people in here do the same. “The man continued. Some audience members, mostly male, cheered.

Before anyone could continue, Helga had grabbed the microphone. “Hi, how do I address you?” she said, in a calm, near cheerful tone.

“Francis?” said the male nerd.

“Hey, Francis, so let’s get this straight- you’re under the impression that we, a table of writers who write speculative fiction, are writing people who are not realistic. And that we are writing stereotypes, is that right?” she said, her voice even and low. The audience at the moment was now so quiet that they could have heard a pin drop. Francis, who had been rather cocky when swaggering up to the mic, looked a little uneasy.

“Yes.” He murmured.
Helga barked a laugh. “Okay cool. So a bunch of people who write stuff that's basically, “Okay, let’s see what happens if this shit were to happen,” , are now being told that we are writing unrealistic things. Let’s try this again with the use of what is considered, 'good fantasy.’” She continued, rather sarcastically. “Lord of the Rings. The granddaddy of speculative fiction.” She intoned. “Are elves real?”

“No, but-“

“Good, are dwarves real?”

“No, but-“

“Are hobbits real, Francis?”

Now, Francis was looking rather indignant for looking like the only target of a smear campaign. “Excuse me, why am I the only one being blamed for this? I merely posed a question! You’re supposed to tell me your views and we can agree to disagree!”

“Francis, at this point, so far all the questions the four of us have been fielding have been answered. And what you are asking is something you should be expecting. “Helga snapped back. “Fantasy should not be stereotypical, it should always flow and shouldn’t have to resort to the same cheap tricks used over and over again. “ She pointed at the portly author, “George writes about duelling families fighting over kingdoms, but less is said about the fighting battles and he chooses to focus more on the political intrigue, and the fact that no one is ever right or wrong in any situation. Noelle here writes about monster girls that become villains. Never at any point are they one-note, one-dimensional figures. They don’t do, ‘Argh, I am alive, brains!’, nor do they do, ‘let’s kill the good shiny princes-“

“Damnit, Helga!” Noelle yelled, “I now want a chapter that is basically, ‘Argh, I am alive, brains!’. Can I keep that?”

“You’re buying me ten pastrami sandwiches for that, Noelle,” Helga smirked. “And Rabia here is the writer of a Marvel superhero, but not just any superhero. A superhero that took up the mantle of a past, household brand name. She made the current incarnation Muslim, and her superhero journey different. Perhaps it doesn’t relate to you, and perhaps it’s unrealistic, but to our readers, they have found what they are looking for that they deem as an escape from reality.”

“That is true.” Rabia replied cheerfully. “So far, my audience has told me that my books are amazing because, in them, no one has ever told them to explode themselves because they’re Muslim or to go back to their country. It doesn’t match up to reality at all!”

Helga gave her a clap of celebration. “So to our readers, all of our work is unrealistic, and people find escape in them. Are they unrealistic? Perhaps. But like what we told Vincent before, all fiction is unrealistic, what matters should be if the characters develop well, and if they are relatable to readers, and if the characters feel respected by the writers. Does that answer your question, Francis?”

The audience stood up and cheered. Helga, who earlier was feeling rage, had now felt every bit of embarrassment for being the only one addressing this. Turning to her fellow panellists, Rabia was raising her hands in a “bow down bitches” way, Noelle was cheering, and George, who had been sitting on the other side of the table, gave her a thumbs up.

“Do you think that was too much?” Helga murmured as she sat back down. “Honestly, I think it’s a bit much- also I shouldn’t have talked over you and Rabia-“
“Are you fucking kidding me?” Noelle demanded, going close to Helga and whispering furiously, “That was magnificent! He was attacking all our work, and you managed to shut his stupid face! I swear to god Helga, that was amazing, I’m so making you godmother to my catbabies in the future, Tessa will agree—

“Yes, that was good!” That was Rabia over there, shaking her shoulder ecstatically. “The next time you and I are in the convention circuits, I will personally make you do all my speeches—

“You’re a writer, Rabia—

“Exactly!”

“Also I think it was already lost when Rabia told off the really annoying guy that there were Muslim female heroines back in the day, please do his research and stop being a stupidhead.” Noelle continued.

“I didn’t say stupidhead—

“Well, you thought it, I could feel it—

“Didn’t we use to have a moderator?” Helga asked, looking around confusedly. At some point, the entire discussion had lost control and it would have been good if a moderator had been here to control some of the comments.

Noelle pointed off stage, where a small dark figure could be seen hunched over a podium, shoulders heaving. “I think we broke him, he seems to be sobbing over there.”

Helga winced. Yeah, she had no idea if the entire discussion went good or bad. “O…kay. I think one of us should consider helping wrap up the entire session, we’ll dismiss the crowd, and then we’ll get hot drinks. I’ll buy."

“Well, that was…a crazy amount of cray cray.” Gerald said when the rest of the group didn’t react when the entire discussion was over.

Ärnold agreed. It had been going pretty well until the question and answer segment, and somehow everything got lost. Even he wasn’t too sure what happened, and he had been manning the camera. Tim, who had been working non-stop to try and adjust the noise levels during the chaos, was now flapping his handkerchief helplessly trying to fan himself through the stress. Sam was patting his shoulder in sympathy.

Patty was the next to speak. “Hey, I learnt quite a bit this session,” she replied drolly. “Mostly that we shouldn’t attack fantasy writers on their work, and that Helga should have become a lawyer if the poetry thing didn’t go anywhere.”

Phoebe nodded. “While I did disagree with the way she structured the argument, I did concur with a lot of what she said. Also, she managed to get the crowd all riled up and cheering for her. It’s pretty cool.”

The other three silently agreed.

Patty stood up. “I’m going to go check with Helga on what she’s doing after this, and if she’s cool, you guys should join us,” she said, beginning to move away from the chairs, and making her way
towards the aisle to go up front to the stage.

“Just text her!” Phoebe yelled.

“The reception here is crap, it’s way faster if I just go up there,” Patty yelled back.

Gerald turned back to his friend. “Think we got good footage?” He asked. Arnold nodded. “Good, when we get back I think I can get one of the contributors to make a listicle along the lines of, ‘Fantasy Authors Slays Trolls, and You Should See How!’ or something. Make it as big as possible, some internet nerds would like this—”

“You won’t be making Helga seem bad, right?” Phoebe blurted out. Arnold had the same concern.

“Course not.” Gerald scoffed. “She made really good points. There are people who would want to see this. If anything, this would probably get Helga and those other authors MORE fans.”

Arnold silently agreed. He was already planning how to ask Helga if he could use some of the points she made for his elementary class.

Patty, who had somehow managed to brisk walk her way to the front to talk to Helga, was gesturing a little and pointing to their group. Helga looked up towards the direction Patty was pointing and made eye contact with the group. Arnold couldn’t tell how Helga was reacting to him and Gerald being there, but she was now looking back down at Patty and gesticulating with her arms. Patty nodded, and they separated.

Patty made her way back in a few minutes. “She’s promised the other writers that she would buy them drinks first for surviving that, ‘Fuckfest,’ but she’s free to hang with us afterwards.” She explained. “She’ll text us when she’s done, and we’ll let her know where we are. Where else do you guys need to go to?”

“Oh really, if you guys are busy you don’t have to join us—” Arnold began.

“But we would like it if you can,” Gerald finished with a twinkle of the eye, “Phoebe, ex of mine, we have a lot of catching up to do, and I know for a fact you’re a fan of Doctor Who. Do you want to come along with us so you can say hi to the new Doctor and get her autograph? We have to introduce ourselves to her since she’s doing an interview with us next week, and this would be a good time to do so. “

“OMIGOD OMIGOD REALLY.” Phoebe gushed, eyes wide. “Jodie Whittaker is here and I GET TO SAY HI- wait the slots are sold out to meet her—”

“I think if you’re very nice, you can say hi and get her autograph—”

“Oh that would be wonderful, thank you!” Phoebe squealed and threw her arms around the taller man. Then the two of them remembered that they were exes and disentangled themselves, looking very self-conscious and awkward.

Helga, who was feeling a little warmer and fuzzier after the cider, was feeling a little more cheered up after the drink fest.

“Welp, so long you guys,” she announced to the group she was sitting with. “I have to figure out where my friends are, and find my agent to see if she would still have me. I suggest you all do the
same. “

The other three raised their glasses in agreement.

“Good. Now, we have all exchanged contact numbers, and Noelle, I will see you when I can, Rabia, I want to see pictures of your cats soon, TEXT ME, and George, I will be patiently waiting for the next chapter of your work.”She promised.

“And you owe me your views on the new upcoming events on WWE,” George replied.

“Yeap, I certainly do. Well, ciao, yáll.”

She waved them all goodbye, and went on her way, grabbing her phone to check up where the others were. She had to admit, she was feeling quite embarrassed considering that she thought she was doing better and now the entire outburst and the worst part of her passionate speeches had been caught on video. And in front of Arnold, who she was slowly becoming friends with again.

*I mean, I figured someone would have recorded it,* she grumbled. It’s a thing that happens. But she had worked hard on maintaining a calm, cool, near harmless demeanour around Arnold and Gerald and then she blew it up again. She probably sounded like an angry maniac.

“See this is what happens when you try and be good,” she muttered. “It blows up all in your bloody fucking face-“

Said face, which was too busy looking down and not where she was walking to, had run smack into another person, and both Helga and the victim of her walking went down.

“Holy fuck!” Helga panicked. From where she was sitting, rubbing her forehead, she could see the other person she bumped into was male and taller than her. “Ah, I’m so sorry, please don’t die on me, I swear I won’t keep looking at my phone while walking anymore,” she babbled as she made her way towards the other man she had nearly whacked into.

Someone laughed, and Helga glared, turned to the direction of the laughter, ready to tell the man off for laughing at someone’s misery, and why wasn’t he helping people that fell down-

“Gerald?” she blurted out in complete surprise. Now that she could see properly, it was indeed Gerald Johansson who was laughing his head off at the spill Helga had taken. She could also see Patty turning her head away, shoulders trembling in a bid not to laugh out loud. Phoebe, who was polite, was giggling behind her hands.

That meant that-

Helga could see that the man she had run into, the man who was now massaging his neck due to the unexpected headbutt he received, had blonde, shaggy-ish hair and an oblong shaped head-

Ah fuck, she accidentally hurt Arnold again.

“Shortman, fuck, I’m so sorry!” she yelled, “You okay? Why was I cursed under an unholy star? I swear to god I will buy you a new throat-“

“Helga,” and there was that raspy-ish voice again, if a little hoarse, chucking,”I’m fine. I swear. So maybe I won’t be able to sing the chorus of Symphony right now, but I don’t think I was able to do so before-“

Helga snorted, and as she helped the man up, both of them were now laughing, Helga from the
unexpected joke that released the tension of her panic away, and imagining Arnold trying to hit the high-pitched vocals of the song in question. Arnold then had to start trying to sing the chorus of Symphony.

“SYmphoNYYYYY” he tried to sing, which was less melodious and more squawking, causing Helga to laugh even harder.

“Yo, you guys good?” That was Gerald, and it only hit Helga properly that yes, there were other people around. “We gotta go see the sights. Helga, I thought your speech was cool, have you considered becoming a revolutionary and helping to drain the swamp?”

“In Macklemore’s America?” Helga replied, and Arnold laughed even more next to her. “I am great with what I have, thanks.” The group started moving forward, going somewhere Helga wasn’t very clear about, and Helga receded back towards Patty and Phoebe.

Patty reached over and gave Helga a hug, “That was a really great speech, and I swear to god, as your number one stan, if I could marry you, I would. “

The blonde woman laughed, “Pattinia, you amazing treasure, I would not be worthy. Sides, you and I both know you can’t stand my stealing the blankets, and you don’t like cats.” She then sobered up, “Did I fuck that entire thing up though?” she asked, “It felt like I did. How did the people react to you? Pheebs, give it to me straight, doc. How serious is it?”

“Helga, that was a great thing you did! “Phoebe said hotly, “We got it all on video, and Gerald promised to give us copies if Rhonda agreed. Even Arnold was impressed. He wanted to know if he could show that video to his 4th-grade class on writing."

Helga darted her eyes forward towards the blonde man who was now figuring out directions with Gerald. “Arnold said that?” she said. Phoebe was probably trying to make her feel better. “That tape really shouldn’t be shown in a class, I slipped a few swear words in it-“

“Fuck the kiddies.” Patty shot back. “Actually, maybe not fuck them, Gerald would definitely help censor the swearing. Part of it is going to be on TalkBuzz, after all. “

Oh criminy, of course, it was. That’s why Arnold and Gerald were here for. Well, Gerald, she could understand, but why was Arnold here? Her previous assumption was that wherever Gerald was, so was Arnold, but then she told herself realistically that it was a very weird assumption to make, considering the two of them were their own people.

She figured she could ask Arnold later. Since she now knew he was at the convention, she could probably get him and Gerald to hang out with them for a bit after they got what they needed, film wise.

Chapter End Notes

The question Francis asked is lifted from a question the author Scott Lynch was asked about his addition of a black, female pirate who was in her mid-forties and had two kids. If you can find it, read it, it’s more eloquent than mine.
Arnold, in his 29 years of existing, had dated and been in a few long-lasting relationships.

For that to happen, a few physical attributes were in his favour: appropriately tall, floppy blonde hair, a great smile, a fit physique. However, those features would have long lost its steam amongst people if not paired up with other attributes he had: a love of music; a compassionate heart; respect for everyone; and a romantic soul. He was articulate, even-tempered unless someone was truly trying his patience, and listened to people’s sorrows without any flip comments, giving sensible advice. He always believed that there was good in everyone, and was an optimist. His cheerful, positive attitude was attractive to many people.

At the same time, what was bad about him was the fact that he believed that there was good in everyone, so often it took far longer than not for him to realise that sometimes, someone having good inside didn’t mean that they were suitable for a relationship, and his sometimes-blinding optimism meant he didn’t see any warning signs. He was getting better at understanding that at 29 than at 22, but it took a while for him to get there. He was more realistic now, he knew what he was looking for when dealing with people, and he had experience dating people of all sorts.

So, he felt that talking to Helga should be a snap, face to face.

As shown by what had happened to him a few minutes ago, it apparently was less of a snap and more of a fast thwack to the throat. Literally.

Well, as he walked with Gerald to set up and take video of the Doctor Who Meet and Greet, life did come at him fast, and experience didn’t compensate for throat attacks from his crushes.

At least it wasn’t an actual throat crush from his crush.

So, he laughed at the joke that he had in no way verbalised to anyone at all, and Gerald was now looking at him strangely. That was embarrassing.

It could have been worse.

“Hey Shortman, you sure your voice is okay?” That was Helga. “You were making a weird croaking sound, you sure I didn’t crush your windpipe or something?”

Keep it together, Shortman, He mentally chided himself. “Yeah, Helga, I’m fine.” He said, smiling, hoping Helga didn’t suspect a thing.

Helga scrutinized him a little more but decided to let it go. Somewhere in Arnold unclenched in relief. It might have been his heart. Or maybe his windpipe. He wasn’t sure.

They spent the next few minutes in relative silence, as they waited for Sam and Tim to argue again about where was a good spot for Gerald and the others to start filming without too much of a disruption to noise and lighting. Gerald was currently talking to Patty and Phoebe, and Helga was scrolling through her phone. Arnold was left standing, holding the camera bag and camera, and wondering if he was being too awkward standing there. Should he make conversation with Helga? What on earth would they talk about? Why was it easier to text via phone but so hard talking face to face like normal adults? Would it be easier if he had food to share? Why didn’t he have food to
share? He could have offered her gum or something, that’s what people do right?

“Well, I have a bone to pick with you, Football Head,” Helga said casually.

What? Oh, good god, what did he do wrong now? He mentally went through the past few texts he sent her in his head. Did he accidentally send her something rude?

“You didn’t reply my text on where you saw that Laila cosplayer.” Helga nudged him with her elbow. “What gives, Blondie? As a creator, I want to know what the fans think of my work, and that shit was so beautifully done I swear it was like a movie costumer had done it. You, “she pointed at him in mock anger, “Just basically cockblocked me and my fans.” she teased.

Arnold laughed nervously, running his hand through his hair in embarrassment. “Oh right! Heh, sorry, it’s just... it all happened so fast, and Gerald needed me to man the camera, so I didn’t reply you back. Sorry about that.”

There. That was the truth, basically.

Helga smirked. “That’s cool, I suppose. I mean, I did send you a few texts afterwards, trying to get some answers, but meh, it’s understandable, you were busy after all.”

Arnold frowned. “Wait, you texted me again?” he asked, taking out his phone and checking the notifications.

Ah no, she was right. Helga had apparently texted him 3 times, mostly making fun of how slow he was in replying. He also apparently seemed to have 10 texts from Grandpa Phil, some about asking him if he could pick up some toilet paper on the way to the Shortmans’ weekly Saturday night dinner, some warning texts about some sort of new stomach superbug that was resistant to antibiotics in general, wondering if WebMD knew anything about raspberries, and if Arnold wasn’t replying him because he was on a date with the girl with the one eyebrow again. Oh god, that was embarrassing. He hoped Helga didn’t see that particular text.

He pocketed his phone just as Helga started talking again.

“So, did your notifications blow up because you weren’t paying attention?” Helga wanted to know. “I mean, at this stage, some poor soul is probably worried about you, judging by that wince of yours. Someone close, maybe? A girlfriend or-”

“No!” Ah fuck, that was too fast and too abrupt to be normal. How did one finesse random denials like that back to a somewhat normal-esque conversation? Where was Gerald, who oozed self-confidence and could talk to absolutely anyone, when he needed him? Or Grandpa, whose self-confidence knew no bounds, not even galaxies maybe, at the type of things he managed to make conversation about with nothing weird happening. “Ah, that is, no girlfriend-”

“Ohfuck, sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed…wife? Husband? Partner? Boyfriend? Lover-”

“Nope, nope. No one.” Arnold cut in. “No one at all, single as a bird.”

What on earth did that mean? He mentally screamed at himself. Were birds known for being single? Was he messing up his metaphors again? This was embarrassing. He should be sent to Timbuktu or something. Maybe it was very relaxing this time of the year.

Deciding that the pause between that sentence and the blonde woman musing over his words, his brain somehow managed to accept that if he compensated conversational skills with a slightly higher
volume, he would be okay.

“Just well, I’m interested in women!” he blurted out, continuously shaping and confirming his position as Pathetic Loser Who Blurs Out Weird Truths to Cute Women and Childhood Friends. Maybe Rhonda had an award for that. “Mostly women, not men, I mean maybe in the future if the right guy were to come along? But like I haven’t- that is- not that anyone has ever come along, both men and women, and I haven’t been interested, not like that- still haven’t found my soulmate, my one and only, the Jiggly to my Puff, the James to my Jessie—”

What on earth was happening, was he actually making Pokemon references? Also, why oh why did he make himself fucking JESSIE. Or a Puff? That one didn’t even make sense! Abort mission! ABORT MISSION—!

"And so, in conclusion, I have no one in my life to share the lonely years with so if no one comes along I’ll probably just shepherd sheep in Timbuktu or something.”

Worst. Conclusion. Ever.

Helga, on her part, did the appropriate thing in reaction to that whole bizarre, rather slipshod statement. Which was to laugh her head off.

Arnold figured that at this point he was being absolutely stupid, so he took comfort in the fact that at the very least Helga thought his pathetic loserness was funny and was laughing, even if she was actually laughing at his sorry ass.

Which she was. Laughing that is. Arnold hadn’t realised it, but when Helga laughed, she went full belly laughing. It wasn’t in any way pretty, and he had seen her laugh before, on videos like the one Eugene did with her, but the full experience made any recorded laugh pale in comparison, making him feel warm inside. It had hit him again that he hadn’t seen Helga ever enjoy herself like that before, not even when they were kids.

That thought did make him feel a bit sad. But not for long, as Helga wiped a tear from her eye.

“Ah Football-Head. What a goofball. It’s so weird that you’re not attached or anything, but hey, some people like the single life. Look at us. We’re all mostly just struggling to get ahead and pay rent, or paying back our student loans, or just…struggling.”

She paused for a bit there, letting the magnitude of her words sink in. “Well shit, that’s actually kinda sad. The people I know so far from our class haven’t gotten married or had kids or anything. Did anyone from our class actually get ahead anywhere on the children thing or even a marriage thing?”

Arnold thought for a bit, glad to think about something he was pretty sure he had a definite answer about. “Thad- Curly Thad- is seeing a girlfriend who lives in Canada. Honestly, we’re not sure if he made up a girlfriend or something there. Sid married his high school sweetheart, they have a bunch of kids in a suburb out there, we don’t see him much. Lila has a son, they live out in the country now—"

He sidled a glance at her just to see how she would react to hearing Lila’s name again. He vaguely remembered that Helga always got angry at the redheaded girl, and he never really understood why. Helga merely looked thoughtful, musing over Arnold’s words.

"They’re sorta lucky, I suppose,” Helga said. “I like being roommates with Eugene, but a family is always pretty good. Stability, a home cooked meal, love… I gotta tell you when I see Phoebe and her parents? I envy that kind of thing.” She didn’t sound too sad, merely truthful about what she felt.
He figured she wouldn’t want to dwell on the subject of her own family, so he decided to change the subject.

“How was dinner at the Heyerdahls?” he asked, “I see Mrs Heyerdahl at the library sometimes when I bring my kids, she likes to keep candy in a bowl out there in reception. She recommends amazing stuff for me and the kids.” Helga, thankfully, took the bait of that conversation detail and he could see her take herself out of the funk she was nearly about to go into and steer it towards much lighter territory.

“Dinner was all good.” Helga waved airily. “Food was eaten, my hunger crops were watered, Eugene nearly choked on a potato at some point- very uneventful.”

Arnold laughed in spite of himself. Of course, Eugene would somehow choke on a potato. “Same old, same old?”

Helga nodded, “Oh god yeah. You should have seen him when he started doing drag. His drag mother wanted to see how he would do dancing in heels, since he was teaching the kids to dance in slippers.”

“Drag mother?” Arnold asked.

“Yeah, you know, the one who helps you get dressed up in drag in the first place, and teaches you how to paint and perform and what not. Anyway, Alyssa thought it would be good practice since the kids would be dancing in them, so she got Eugene some 3-inch heels to practice in. One class later, Eugene had a broken mirror and a bunch of crying kids, and Alyssa, who was shocked but not too surprised, told him that he was paying for the mirror one way or another. Somehow, they both decided to do it drag wise and to cut a long story short, Eugene got a small successful side career in drag, paid Alyssa back after a week, and became Jinkx Fortuna. He has never looked back since.”

Arnold was shocked. “Drag pays that quickly and well? Wait, how much did that mirror cost?”

“400 bucks,” Helga said, grinning. “Alyssa loves her mirrors, and Eugene somehow destroyed it so hard the whole studio was covered in shards. It was either do drag or get fired. The kids weren’t harmed or anything, they were just very surprised.”

Arnold had no other words beyond, “Damn, I’m in the wrong line of work.”

“Eugene just got really lucky,” Helga replied. “But yeah, he gets loads in tips now. Phoebe and I sometimes joke about how he’s our sugar daddy.”

Arnold burst out laughing. The thought of Eugene, redhead, musical obsessed Eugene, as a sugar daddy to Helga and Phoebe, who were both no slouches in the work department, was pretty funny. “Where is he anyway?”

“Ah, fortune favours the one they called Jinkx Fortuna.” Helga drawled. “He has a gig or something tonight at the local queer club, we’re all planning to go down afterwards, it would be amazing.” She tilted her head in curiosity. “Do you want to come? I figure Eugene would be cool if you and Gerald come. “Then her eyes narrowed. “You guys are cool with Eugene doing drag and coming to a queer club, right? Cause I won’t tolerate any sort of discomfort from you two about men wearing lipsticks or dresses-”

“I’d love to come!” Arnold said hurriedly, sensing that while Helga and he were friends now, this was a subject that was clearly personal to her. He also did not want to be on the receiving end of a
classic Helga G Pataki rant and wanted to dispel her of any misgivings immediately. “And I promise, Gerald and I will behave. Gerald and I are probably the last people to ever judge anyone on that, and we’re always in to support our friends.”

Helga still looked at him warily, but she did visibly relax her shoulders, and Arnold figured that this was something she often did when it came to Eugene and seemed very personal. “Cool. “she said, then she shook her head ruefully, “Sorry. It’s just a very sensitive subject and Eugene means a lot to me and I want him to be comfortable-”

“Totally cool.” Arnold reassured her. “So are we heading straight there after the convention or…”

Helga took out her phone from her fitted leather jacket, (according to her, she was apparently some bounty hunter from steampunk or something, Arnold wasn’t exactly sure), and scrolled through the device. “So apparently Eugene’s gig is at 10.30pm, and Phoebe’s going down earlier to have dinner with her parents and then driving them to the club. Patty’s leaving as well, she’s got an errand to run for her mom afterwards but will meet us at the club straight, Eugene’s a no-go, he’s rehearsing and he’ll take around 2-3 hours to get into drag before the gig starts…” she looked up, twisting her face as she did some mental calculations. “Welp, I have a 2-hour gap to figure out what to do, and maybe pick up dinner-”

“Why not go with Phoebe? “Arnold asked. It didn’t seem right that Helga would be left out for dinner when the Heyerdahls were nothing but loving to Helga and Eugene.

“Oh, I made her do it,” Helga said with a toss of her hand. “Made sense to me at the time. The girl is devoted to her parents but rarely gets to spend time with them since she started her internship, which was like…ages ago? She’s completed her residency but still doesn’t have time to spend with them, so I made her promise to do a dinner with just family before we leave on Monday. In all that commotion, I completely forgot about this, to be honest, so-”

“Have dinner with me.” Arnold blurted out.

“What?” Helga replied, shooting him a confused look.

What?! Echoed Arnold’s head, less confused and more panicked. What was he doing?

“Have dinner with me and Gerald at the boarding house.” Arnold clarified. “I usually go down every Saturday to have dinner with them, and Gerald comes along sometimes. They usually cook for an army really, and we always get leftovers, so I’m pretty sure they have room for one more-”

There. There we go! He thought. Lie to her with the truth, that he was sure they had space for one more person to eat, and not that he wanted to spend more time with her before she left, which was also the truth but an omission of the truth! Take that, truth!

The blonde woman was already shaking her head. “Nah, I don’t want to intrude-”

“Hey, you invited us to one place, now I invite you back to another place.” Arnold countered. “Think of it as us being square. Besides, you need to eat, and so do we, and we just so happen to be going there to eat. Eat with us. Grandma’s experimenting with Chinese food this time, and Dad’s helping with making dumplings. You’ll like it. Even Gerald likes it, and he’s not a fan of Chinese food.”

To show Helga that he was not joking, he yelled out to his friend, who was currently impatiently waiting for his crew to stop arguing, “HEY G! TELL HELGA YOUR VIEWS ABOUT GRANDMA’S CHINESE FOOD!”
“YOUR GRANDMA’S MAKING CHINESE TODAY? FUCK YEAH, I’M THERE.”

“See?” Arnold grinned, his head turned so he was waving back at Gerald. “Come on, it’ll be fun. Sides, you haven’t been over to the Sunset Arms, have you?” He turned back to look at Helga, “I can give you the grand tour of the place-“

A loud hacking sound drew his attention as he looked over and realised that Helga was coughing so hard she was turning red from the effort, bent double at the waist.

“Woah, woah!” he yelled out in concern. “You okay?” The convention hall must have been dusty or something. “Do you need air?” he asked. “Do you need water or something?”

Helga murmured something in a whisper but by then Phoebe and Patty, who both overheard Helga’s coughing effort, ran over to check up on her. “Helga, you okay? “Phoebe asked, her usual light voice now going clinically professional. “Arnold, what just happened?” She targeted her question over to the blonde man, Patty meanwhile was hitting Helga on the back, trying to get rid of whatever was in Helga’s throat by forcing it out slap wise.

“I was just asking if she was okay with coming over to my place for dinner-"

“What?” Phoebe asked, the tension in her voice all gone now. Patty had stopped slapping Helga on the back to stare at Arnold.

“Y-yeah?” Arnold stammered. What was going on?

Helga, who had now stopped coughing, but was still a little pink on the cheek, waved her hands to get their attention, “Guys, guys! I’m fine, I swear. I think I swallowed a fly or something, that’s all,” she croaked out.

Arnold was relieved that she seemed to have recovered but Phoebe and Patty, who still looked very suspicious, grabbed Helga by the arms and marched her out, Phoebe yelling back that they were going to the bathroom so Phoebe could give Helga a proper check-up and that Arnold was to text later to update them of their location if the crew finally decided on what to shoot.

Arnold, confused, yelled back the affirmative. He hoped Helga was okay.

“What was that about?” Gerald, who had finally seemed able to separate himself from his crew’s argument, strolled over to check on his baffled, blonde friend.

“I was asking her to come with us over for dinner-"

“Woah woah woah!” Gerald took one step back in surprise, “You asked Helga over to family dinner?” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah?” Arnold replied tentatively.

“How and why did this happen?” Gerald asked.

Arnold explained how it happened, starting with Helga’s invitation to Eugene’s gig (Gerald had paused that explanation to ask about that, and agreed that yes, he would be cool going to see Eugene perform after this), extending it to the Chinese food invite at the Sunset Arms, and then Helga’s sudden choking on a fly.

“Mhmmm.” Gerald said, one hand cupping his chin as though he were pondering the secrets of the
universe. “Annnnnd why did WE- “the emphasis on that particular word meant that he clearly meant Arnold and Arnold alone, of course,” -invite Helga to the Shortman family dinner?”

Arnold, a little flushed now, muttered something about Helga really missing out on family dinners and homecooked meals, and it made sense to invite her over to family dinner.

“Oh reaaaally?” Gerald drawled. “And I suppose nothing to do with the fact that you wanted to spend more time with her so you used homemade Chinese food as an excuse?”

Arnold was still flushed, but he murmured something about it wasn’t like that, well maybe it was, but Helga liked talking about family dinners and homecooked food a lot and he thought it was a nice thing to offer really, it wasn’t anything super suspicious.

“Mhmm. “Gerald nodded, a grin cracking his serious face. “Only you, my man. Only you would ask someone out and accidentally cause them to get in a choking accident. Only you.”

Arnold nodded sadly. Him and his bad luck.

“I swear, it was just bad luck!” Helga, still hoarse from her coughing accident, was now trying to convince Phoebe and Patty that really, she was fine. “I invited him and Gerald to come to Eugene’s gig, we got to talking about how to get there, I was trying to figure out dinner- don’t give me that sad face again, Pheebs! He then said that I could come along with them to dinner, and then mentioned that he would give me the grand tour around the boarding house- “

Phoebe, who had already connected A, B, and C, was now laughing hysterically, while Patty, who still looked incredulous, asked, just to clarify her theory, “He doesn’t know that you of all people know how the Sunset Arms looks like inside, outside, within the walls and what not, does he?”

Helga shook her head. Patty then started laughing herself.

“Come on guys!” she pleaded, sitting on the bathroom counter, facing Patty and Phoebe who were both laughing hysterically now. For some miraculous reason, they had managed to find a near empty female bathroom. Considering that it was a Saturday and that most cosplayers used the bathroom to fix up their costumes, this was an anomaly. “Be nice to me! I nearly died of embarrassment out there!”

“Wait, didn’t you once fall off the ceiling smack into the floor when the guys were eating ice cream that one time?” Phoebe asked. “When you went to retrieve that tape during N₂O I? You mentioned that you fell right in the middle of the room or something and everyone was staring at you.”

“Pheebs, I love you, but just say Nitrous Oxide- Laughing Gas- Incident. “Helga groaned. “Also, yeah but when we got back the next day to school, I checked: apparently everyone thought it was a chimney sweeper –”

“Chimney sweeper?” Phoebe and Patty said together, both incredulous.

“Okay fine, I told them it was a chimney sweeper-“

“Helga, Hilltown is an urban area, the boarding house doesn’t even have CHIMNEYS- “

“Look they bought it okay? I told Harold about it first, pretended to ask if he knew about any chimney sweepers being incompetent and falling off the ceilings, relating a true personal story of one
that fell down the week before at my place, and swore up and down about it. I then threatened a
bunch of third graders to repeat that story about their own chimney sweepers-

“Wait, that whole story was all you?” Patty raised an eyebrow, “It was all over the library back then!
I was on desk duty that time, all the little kids were passing notes-“

“Yeah, I’m pretty proud of that, I managed to Inception a whole story before that director guy even
had the notion. The point was, kids told other kids, the adults listened in and believed in incompetent
chimney sweeps, and started a campaign about getting rid of them, and by the end of the month,
Hillwood had no chimney sweepers anymore.”

“Helga, we never had chimney sweepers in Hillwood, they all left by 1970s-”

“Phoebe, darling, light of my life, I’m just explaining what happened, okay?” Helga waved her
hands frantically trying to get them to understand. “We’ve long established that logic doesn’t really
exist in the minds of our universe-”

“Eh, she has a point.” Murmured Patty. “I mean, Pigeon Man flew to Paris with birds clutching his
arms carrying him over borders. It’s practically impossible, like a swallow carrying a coconut-”

“- So, in conclusion, Arnold doesn’t know that I have been in the Sunset Arms and stalking him for a
point of time in my life.” Helga finished, determined to get straight to the point so that they could
stop getting distracted by other insignificant details. “Should I accept his invite to dinner?”

“Yes.” Replied Patty and Phoebe in unison.

“Why?!“

“Firstly, weren’t you determined to say that there was nothing going on between you two?” Phoebe
asked. “By that logic, friends go over to people’s houses all the time for dinner. It’s perfectly fine.
Besides, I don’t like you pottering alone all by yourself at the AirBnB for two hours.”

“Pheebs-“

“Furthermore- “that was Patty now. “I recall you saying that you’re now going to be mature about it,
being friends and what not. If you reject it without any reason, it would be silly. Besides, do you
have any actual reason for refusing his offer?”

Helga opened her mouth to retort and realised Patty did have a point. She closed her mouth
mutinously.

“Besides, “Patty continued, “Gerald would be there. He won’t make the dinner awkward, it’ll be the
adults concentrating on three of you instead of just you two. It’s not like you’re going over to do an
official, ‘Meet the Parents’ session –”

“I swear I cannot even with you two right now- “Helga muttered. A thought struck her. “Fuck wait,
the grandparents know who I am-”

(“Arnold’s grandparents are still alive?” Patty whispered. Phoebe nodded.)

“- so what if they see me and tell Arnold what I did-“

“Helga, think about this rationally,” Phoebe said, now grabbing Helga by the shoulders and holding
her firmly so that she could look straight down at her. “Arnold said he wanted to give you, ‘The
Grand Tour’, right?”
Helga nodded.

“By that logic, he clearly doesn’t know you have been inside the boarding house. This means nobody told him about the Sleepwalking Incident-“

“The Locket Incident… ‘That was Patty.

“The Parrot Incident…”

“The N₂O Incident…”

“Not you too, Patty!” Helga moaned.

“Jezebel, I’m sorry, but chemical compound formulas are fun to say.” Patty shrugged.

“The point we’re trying to say- “Phoebe said, drawing the attention back to her. “Is that you’re fine. You are going to agree to hang out with him for dinner, go in, be a mature adult, pretend to ooh and ahh over every bit of the boarding house- “

“Try not to be too creepy-”

“Yes-”

“Or crawl between the walls again like a possum-”

“Yes, Patty.”

“Or somehow spread the rumour about the mystery of the Non-Existent Chimney Sweepers who want revenge for getting banished out of Hillwood-"

“Patricia Smith!” Phoebe snapped.

“Fine fine, I just can’t believe you got away with it-"

“And it’s two hours.” Phoebe said. “Nothing horrible can happen in two hours. Just go in, eat, bond with these people, and then you can get a little wasted during Eugene’s gig. You know you’re excited to get a little Jinkxy Fortuna performance.”

Helga made a noise that sounded like, “Mflubbermist” but Phoebe took it as, “Yes, Phoebe you goddess, right as always.”

“Well, that’s settled then.” Phoebe released Helga cheerfully. “You’re going. Have fun and relax! It’s been 17 years; these people don’t know you and your life!”

“And if they did, they would never let you date their son anyway, so you’re still good.” Patty said, giving her a thumbs up.

Helga jumped off the bathroom counter, feeling a little better after that strange pep talk. If that counted as a pep talk. She was a little shaky on her feet, but a weak smile twitched her lips as she started fiddling with her hair while turning to look at the mirror.

“I’m good.” She stared at her reflection in the mirror. “I’m cool, I’m calm, I’m amazing, I’m Helga G Pataki. What can possibly go wrong?”
Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN DUN.
Contrary to popular belief, Helga had not been to the Sunset Arms all that much-

Gripes, even in her brain that seemed like a lie. She had been aware of where the blonde boy had lived since she was 6, when she had started first grade, and Big Bob and Miriam had more or less forgotten that small children had to be taken care of and chaperoned, letting her do almost anything she wanted. One day, she had decided that perhaps walking would be a good way to get home instead of getting on the bus and got horribly lost.

It was only until she had gotten to the Sunset Arms that she realised it had looked familiar. Big Bob sometimes drove by this area and it meant that this place was 5 minutes away from home. The door opened and an old woman had appeared, dressed in green and an apron tied around her waist. A bunch of cats and dogs and even a pig had rushed out when the door opened and Helga stopped, fascinated at the animals that came out of the door. The older woman looked around, as though she was waiting for someone to come back, and her gaze settled on Helga, little tiny, pink puffy jacket-wearing Helga.

Helga caught her breath because she wasn’t used to strangers staring at her like that, but puffed her chest out and pretended she was walking in a certain direction as though she knew what she was doing.

The older woman looked as though she wanted to yell out something to her, but got distracted by an old Packard driving by, where a wizened old man got out, alongside a small, short blonde boy wearing a blue cap and a sweater slightly too big for him. Helga used that distraction to make a quick escape, which luckily was also the way back home. Miriam hadn’t had the slightest notion that anything had been amiss.

Since then, Helga was very aware of where the Sunset Arms was, thank you very much. It may have been 17 years since she had last been there, but she still knew how far and where the boarding house was from school and where she used to live.

What she didn’t realise was how much the nostalgia would hit her like a ton of bricks when Gerald, who was driving the car, turned to a good parking spot across the road from the boarding house, and she got a good look at the old boarding house fully when she looked out the window.

It looked exactly the same. The solid red foundation, the stone steps, the bronze sign emblazoned with the name of the boarding house. Back in the day, Helga had always dismissed it as a bit of a dump, but never out loud in front of Arnold as even then it felt that it was cutting it a little too close to home. Now, it felt like coming home.

It even looked newer. They must have decided to put in a new coat of paint on the building, at some point, from where she was standing. As they got out of the car, the place looked small and larger,
somehow. It made sense after all. She was near half the size she was when she spent her childhood days there, and now she was older, bigger, and more assured.

Who was she kidding? She was nervous as hell.

"So this your first time you’ve properly been to the Sunset Arms—” Arnold said from where he was standing, on her right.

" What are you talking about, fool?” Gerald demanded, walking up to Arnold’s other side.” She’s been over before!”

Arnold’s face scrunched up in confusion. It would have been very cute if not for the fact that Helga’s heart had been pounding faster than usual at what Gerald said. His face cleared up in understanding. “Oh right, my mistake!” Turning to Helga, he went, “So you have been to the boarding house a few times—”

Never had she felt so personally attacked and her mouth reacted before her brain did.“Since when? I don’t remember anything from 1996 onwards, I cannot recall the events you have mentioned, or the nights in question—”

"You’ve been on the roof a few times, for parties,” Arnold continued. “And maybe the stairwell—”

“Don’t forget that time we wanted to see that comet and we got the whole class to come over and eat cereal!” Gerald quipped.

“ And that time we watched that documentary that they did on our class!” Arnold recalled, laughing slightly. “ And the time Helga and I did the biosquare project in 3rd grade—”

He turned back just as Helga, who was still spouting denials, was saying, “ I have rights! I have an interest in old architecture! Nothing you say can be admitted in the court of law—”

She stopped because she then realised that Arnold and Gerald were staring at her. It was getting quite awkward, so she broke the tension by laughing awkwardly.

Thankfully, they laughed too, a little hesitantly because neither of them knew why they were laughing. Which was a good thing, cause Helga didn’t know either. She also managed to stop before the laughing too got awkward.

She gave herself a shake as Arnold and Gerald walked ahead, crossing the road to get to the front stoop of the boarding house. “ Get it together, you twisted little freak!” she muttered to herself before she strode to the familiar building.

Being nervous around old school crushes brought out a side of her that she really didn’t like. Arnold was being friendly and sweet right now, it wouldn’t do to ruin that friendship with her old, really rather creepy ways.

Arnold, being the social kid that he was, had always brought people over to the boarding house. However, he had only brought three girls over to the boarding house to meet his family for dinner in THAT way.

The first was Lila Sawyer. At around 10th grade, Lila and Arnold had finally gotten closer and Lila agreed to date him and be his girlfriend. Arnold, ecstatic, invited her over for dinner two weeks into
their dating, and Miles and Stella, along with Grandpa and Grandma and everyone in the boarding house was there. The dinner went off fine if a little awkward, and Arnold had the feeling that Lila had not enjoyed the experience as much as he did. A month later, Lila broke it off. She had explained that she was ever so sorry, but Arnold and she just didn’t work out as a couple, and they valued very different things as people. Arnold, confused, kept asking her what she meant, but Lila didn’t explain.

It was only a while later, when Lila and Arnold had added each other as friends on Facebook, and were catching up, that Lila explained that Arnold’s large family had thrown her off and she didn’t think she was able to handle having such a large extended family talk to her all the time for the rest of her life. Arnold was a little miffed, of course, but he accepted that his family was unusual and may not be suitable for everyone. It would have been good if Lila had actually told him her concerns, but Lila was if anything polite, and she had explained she had so many things going on that she just didn’t know how to begin that conversation. The two agreed that they would keep in touch in the future, though it did ring a little hollow to Arnold.

The second was a college girlfriend, whose name, Arnold was a little ashamed to say, he had forgotten. He remembered vaguely that she had warm hands, he and her had spent nearly 2 years of their lives together, and he loved her, but she didn’t love him as much as he had. Bringing her over to have dinner seemed to make sense, ad she was polite, if a little lukewarm towards them. She had broken up with him and he got his first serious heartbreak, spending ages in bed and crying at times. Gerald had been by his side a lot back then. He had a lot to thank Gerald for.

The third was another teacher he worked with, an older woman known as Pearl. She had been amazing, he remembered and taught him quite a bit about teaching. She had an elegant dancer’s frame and lovely blue eyes, but she looked troubled, and Arnold invited her over to meet the family during Thanksgiving. She ate and got along rather well with the rest of the family, and they were rather cut up when Pearl had to move somewhere else and broke up with Arnold. She was the one the family thought Arnold had let get away.

So Arnold, when he opened the door to the Sunset Arms with a key, thought that if he acted casual, and showed that Gerald was there too along with Helga, they would see it as him inviting friends over out of the kindness of his heart, and nothing more. He had texted them ahead of time, just to let them know.

Well he texted his dad, who was, as far as he knew, the nicest of the family, and was the one helping his grandma do the cooking, so it made sense to let him know how many dumplings to make.

Of course, he hadn’t realised there were a few factors he had forgotten:

1) His dad was married to his mom, who wanted to know when Arnold was ready for children and/or a partner.

2) His dad was the son of Phillip Shortman, known to be evil and perpetual texter, and head of the Gossip Tree.

3) His family was, in association with his grandpa, evil.

4) His family was his family and they were evil and they were an evil, evil family.

It had to be emphasized how evil his family was.

The door had opened, and the three of them were greeted with a yell of, “They’re here!” before the
loud music started blasting through the front door.

” SO HE’S A BIT OF A FIXER-UPPER-” trilled the music from speakers, and Arnold nearly deafened, flushed the reddest he had ever been. Behind him, Helga had covered both ears, and Gerald, who was an aficionado of music, including Disney, and babysat his nieces and nephews often, started laughing when he recognised the song.

“What the hell is that?!” Helga yelled. She didn’t seem to have recognised the song, which was a blessing to Arnold. The speakers were now saying that it was okay that he’s a bit of a fixer-upper, and that the girl could fix the fixer-upper with a little bit of love, which was NOT something he wanted Helga to recognize or hear.

Arnold ran towards the wall and switched off the bluetooth speakers that he had picked out for Miles awhile ago, fuming silently as he turned to his grandfather and parents, who were lined up, grinning. Except for his father. Who was now bent over laughing his head off. These monsters.

“Family!” he yelled, a little louder than he usually would have. The speakers were really messing with his volume control now. “I need to speak to you guys! In Mom’s study! Now!”

Gerald, still sniggering, helped him crowd the people up the stairs, while Helga, now left alone, yelled back, “Wait, what do you want me to do-”

“Eleanor!” Arnold’s Grandmother, who for once was not doing anything to make him miserable, had now cornered Helga for herself, “We have business to talk about! The White House needs you to be in the room where it happens, and right now Aaron Burr will shoot Hamilton if you’re not there! Scooch with me!”

“But I-” her voice grew softer as Arnold, gritting his teeth, led his family to Stella’s study, the most sound proof area of the house. He had a bone to pick with his family of trolls.

Helga, who had been ushered in the kitchen by the surprisingly stronger older woman, was about to protest some more when she was given a wooden spoon.

“Stir,” Helga was told, and was pointed towards a wok, where some fried rice was frying up. She tried to stir the rice as much as she could. The best she could do was poke at it with the spoon, but hey, she was trying.

”So I know you!” Arnold’s grandmother said, casually, as she was chopping up vegetables with swift skill. “I’ve seen your face before, and I know faces like yours.”

Helga gulped, wondering, and hoping against all hope that it was just the grandmother’s way of being eccentric and strange. Did she treat all house guests like this? She could sort of understand why Arnold didn’t have any women in his life if they had to face this from the matriarch of the family.

The old woman had pushed the chopped vegetables into a bowl, and she turned to Helga. “Look at me, kid. Let me get a closer look.”

Helga, silently, did as she was told.

“Hm…” the older woman tutted, grabbing Helga’s cheek to look at her, tilting her face from left to right. “It’s just as I thought.”
She released the blonde’s cheek, and announced, triumphantly, “You’re a thief, a trickster, a ceiling destroyer, a stalker, and a sneak!”

Helga gaped and tried to protect her good name, which she felt was being exposed for the criminal she felt she really was. “I’m not!” she protested weakly.

”Mhmm, and a liar too!” Arnold’s grandmother cheerfully shot back. “Definitely a little bit of a trollop. Madam, you are no lady, and I wouldn’t trust you to help raise the Titanic if it required all the holy power in the world!” she laughed, opening a cupboard to get the salt.

Helga didn’t know if she wanted to cry or panic.

Arnold’s grandmother turned back to her. “Well, don’t stand there!” she said, “Help me! Keep stirring! I didn’t said I didn’t like you!”

*Say what now.*

“Say what now?” Helga repeated, weakly.

Arnold’s grandmother laughed, “Well, child, I wanted to make sure you were the same girl you were who stalked my baby grandboy all those times, and who kept getting her stuff taken by my baby boy Arnie. You’re definitely a troublemaker, child, and I like your outfit, you’re no sucker.”

She looked down at her own dress. “Think I should try leather pants like yours one day?” she asked. “I’m not sure if I have the calves for it anymore, I used to be in the circus, you know.”

Helga, who had absolutely no idea how to react to that conversation, decided to break down the issues one at a time. “So you don’t hate me?”

”Of course not!” Arnold’s grandmother chuckled. “Why, in all honesty, you’ve done quite a bit of good for my grandbaby than anyone else, even that Gerald boy. Honestly, do you think they would get married one day? Cause if I didn’t get you as a granddaughter in law, I wouldn’t mind Arnold getting married to him. He’s a good sort, great provider, very charming. I think he would be a great grandson to share around the other ladies.”

Helga, despite herself, snorted.

”There’s the troublemaker I know!” Arnold’s grandmother yelled in triumph.

“So, you knew about the time I came over to get the blasted parrot?” Helga asked tentatively. “I’m really sorry I destroyed your ceiling at the time-”

“Nonsense, I told Phil that you being there and falling down twice meant that it was obviously the reinforcements needed some working.” Arnold’s grandmother replied. “If one day we had to hide from the Nazis again, which seems to be what our leader wants to do, apparently, we need good ceilings and floors! He agreed, and we were lucky, our boarding house apparently counts as a historical landmark so we got a grant to help us with the repairs.”

Helga nodded in relief until she thought back to what the old woman had said. “Twice?”

“Yes, I know about that too.” Arnold’s grandmother pushed up her glasses, and gave her a wink, “I knew that there was no such thing as an errant chimney sweeper, but Phil was too eager to get rid of them, something about a grudge or something, so I let him lead the charge to get rid of chimney sweepers back then. I also know about the locket incident-”
Helga gasped. The old woman laughed, “Phil saw you in the trunk, and decided not to let Arnold in on the secret. I put two and two together when I saw the locket and Phillip told me what transpired in the basement. You, my dear, are very determined, and I like you for that. You remind me of me, in fact. Next time, though I would recommend that you just tell me instead of going to all that trouble. I am more astute and smarter than you or my baby grandson thinks.”

Helga laughed in relief. It was strange to have someone in Arnold’s family in on her old secret, but she was just happy that she seemed to like her. “You won’t have to worry about that, Mrs Shortman, I don’t have feelings like that for Arnold anymore.”

The old woman looked back at her sharply. “Hmmm?” she said. “Well, that’s a bit of a shame.” The old woman sighed a little, “Well, that’s how life goes I suppose. I should be grateful that at the very least you two are friends.”

Helga nodded, grateful that someone at the very least understood her off the bat. “Yes! Also, I’m just happy he’s forgiven me and let me back in his life as friends, I’m truly just good to be friends since I caused him so much shit the last time.” her eyes widened as she realised that she had sworn in front of Arnold’s grandmother of all people.

The old woman laughed, “Yeah, you did cause him a lot of shit,” she said, winking at Helga to let her know she caught that swear, and yes, she was okay with it. “But hey, it was fun to hear about it, and I think the whole experience made you who you are. And dearie, don’t call me Mrs Shortman. Gertie is perfectly fine, or Pookie if you’re nasty.”

Helga burst out laughing again. Gertie was a weird weird weird weird woman, but she might be in love with her.

“So, let’s recap, shall we?” Arnold Shortman, who had never in his life ever been as embarrassed by his family as this, was stalking the room, pacing about in his mom’s study, looking at three guilty parties. Well, two, and a defiantly smirking grandpa. Gerald was still leaning against the door, laughing silently now.

“Helga and I? Are just good friends. No amount of Disney music, not even from the soundtrack of one of the nicest movies I have been forced to see by Nadine, can change that. Have you ever met anyone swayed by Disney music?”

“Well, yes, Eduardo was once pushed almost to tears when he listened to, ‘Can You Feel The Love Tonight’ -” Miles cheerfully pointed out, but decided not to continue when his wife nudged him in the arm.

“Well, Arnold, you’re missing out on a great opportunity there!” Grandpa mullishly replied. “We thought that the song would give you and her a bit of a push. That song is a classic, and the family of trolls in that movie just wanted the best for their baby blonde boy, and it relates to you very well, you’re no prize pig yourself! Why, I remember the time you too had to tinkle in the woods.”

Arnold slapped his palm on his forehead. Gerald just laughed a bit more audibly. Arnold could hear the man whisper, “Thank you, Yeezus, for the best white family ever” in between silent hacks of laughter.
“Mom, dad, please,” the blonde man implored his parents, trying to get them to feel a little sympathy for him. “Helga doesn’t have much of a good thing here, she hasn’t gone back to see her family at all.”

Stella gasped, “That poor girl!”

“- And I just want to spend some time with her and make sure she eats something before we go out later-”

“Oooooooh, you’re on a date?” Grandpa stood up suddenly. “Hot diggity!”

“My baby boy is growing up!” Miles mock-sobbed into his wife’s shoulder, which was a feat, as he was a head taller than she was. Stella, giggling now, gave her father-in-law a high five.

“We are, that is, including Gerald and Phoebe and some of Helga’s friends.” Arnold said, testily. “We’re going to watch a drag show at a bar after this. We’re all going to have a good time. Helga and I are going to be friends, and I don’t want any talk of me dating her, or her dating me. She doesn’t need that, just ask her standard questions, and be normal!”

It took a while of wrangling, but all three older adults finally agreed to Arnold’s requests, and Arnold was reassured to a certain extent that they would try and get through the night unscathed.

Relatively unscathed.

Oh god, just let him get through the night.

Gerald was still crying from mirth. “Oh, wow! I actually do remember the time you had to tinkle in the woods!”

“I know where you live, Gerald.” Arnold muttered. “I will destroy the things you love. I swear.”

Helga, in all honesty, was having one of the best times she had ever had in the Sunset Arms. Arnold, who had come out of the study a little flushed and frowny, had smiled in relief when he saw Helga and Gertie chatting happily over the stove as he walked into the kitchen. Apparently, both Helga and Gertie shared a love for Lady Gaga, and it somehow led to a rather long meandering conversation about their love for drag queens. She had left for a few minutes and was now dressed in a bubble dress to show Helga, trusting Helga to plate the fried rice on her own. Helga, a little panicked trying to plate fried rice, decided to take it in stride, scooped all the rice she could on the plate and whooped as Gertie sashayed in with the bubble dress. Laughingly, she took out her phone and showed her the time she dressed up as Gaga for Halloween. Gertie was ecstatic.

When asked what the whole music thing was about, Arnold had flushed and muttered something about his family’s obsession with Frozen. Helga, having never seen the Disney movie herself, (she had fallen asleep when Eugene was rewatching it on DVD, and never got around to actually watching it fully), shrugged, and decided to drop the subject. The family was eccentric after all.

She was reintroduced to Miles and Stella, who welcomed her with open arms. Miles had grey streaks running liberally through his blonde hair, and at the age of 60, he still had the jawline of a movie star. Stella, her reddish-brown tied in a messy bun, was still as beautiful as the last time Helga saw her and hugged Helga tightly. Helga was a little shy but hugged back. The last time they had seen each other, Miles and Stella had been busy being active in Arnold’s life and had at one point offered Helga and her family condolences for having to move. Unlike the other people who she snapped at, she
couldn’t bear to be mean to the people who had been the reason why Arnold nearly risked his life to save and had politely accepted their kind thoughts.

Arnold’s Grandpa had then entered, and seeing the blonde woman, the first comment he made was, “Well, no more one eyebrow, huh?”

Helga laughed it off. At one point, Eugene, who had made himself best friend of Helga, had told her that being a theatre geek meant that she had to put her best face forward, and that meant being open to new experiences. This meant, for some reason, waxing. Both of them saved up to get facial waxes before a performance they both had, and to cut a long story short, Eugene was now no longer allowed at the waxing studio. Helga, however, they thought was sturdier and less likely to break things, so they allowed her back in.

It was weird to have two eyebrows, but Eugene and the makeup artists that helped out during the theatre productions agreed that it made sense and it meant that they could open her to more makeup looks on stage now. Waxing was costly, so Helga sometimes did her own upkeep by going to a threading studio which was way cheaper, or doing it herself. The one good thing about having two eyebrows was the fact that it was one of the few things that made her resemble Big Bob Pataki, and losing it meant that when she looked in the mirror, she didn’t look like her father anymore.

She turned back to Arnold’s grandpa, and shot back, “Hey, you should consider waxing your eyebrows yourself, yours still look like wings, Mr Martin Scorsese.”

Arnold choked back on a laugh, while Miles and Stella made faces. Helga winced, wondering if she had gone a little too far.

The old, wiry man gave Helga a look, raising his thick, wing-like eyebrow. “A whippersnapper, eh? Martin Scorsese ain’t got nothing on me. Did I tell you about the time I directed a movie back in the 1920s?”

Helga raised one suspicious eyebrow. Arnold facepalmed into his hands. Gerald was now just grinning and trying his best not to choke on water. Gertie gave Helga a thumbs up.

Helga relaxed a little as most of the family were led to the dining room to eat, along with the boarders. Well, she’d survived this far. Gertie was her ally in dinner, and when she had gone to pat Arnold on the shoulder in comfort, Arnold had looked up at her to give her one of the warmest smiles she had ever gotten. Helga could honestly say that stuff could have gone a hell load worse.

Chapter End Notes

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A SNOWMAN

.....O KAE BYEEEEEEE

The full song Arnold's family is blasting is this. Read the lyrics. I felt it fit.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FJyMwYB2yw
Helga had met some of the boarders of the Sunset Arms before. Well, technically she had met three of the most common ones.

Ernie Potts, she had seen before. When you were a girl that roamed about with your friends regularly and you live in the neighbourhood where urban redevelopment was common, a short, bald contractor with a temper as fiery as his remaining red hair was very recognizable. She and Phoebe had walked past multiple building sites where the contractor was working, and Ernie would always raise his hat in acknowledgement of Phoebe, his best demolitions student, and her best friend. It was likely that he wouldn’t remember her, but she wasn’t counting on it, honestly. What adult man would remember a 12-year-old girl?

The man was still short, portly and angry. Grey had replaced the coppery threads of what remained of his hair, and the man was dressed in a red velour tracksuit with a gold medallion. Arnold and Gerald had explained on the way over that Ernie Potts had retired from the construction industry, but had retired with a rather sweet pension and recently got married to his much younger wife. He didn’t want for children, which was okay, he and his wife were in agreement of that. They had their own apartment outside of the city, but they came back for Saturday dinner. They always did.

Thien Hyunh, the taller Vietnamese man? That was trickier. She had never formally met the man before, only seen him around town, working at the restaurant making tacos at the Mexican fast food joint. She bought tacos from him, and the name tag said that his name was Thien. She kept that name in her head because she thought Thien was a funny name, it was basically an I in between the word Then, like half of the word was separated by a wall. That was all she knew about him. She mostly called him Mr Hyunh in her head too.

However, she had met his daughter, a tall, gorgeous Vietnamese woman who was in her twenties when Helga burst through her door, looking for a Mai who lived there, and that she had found her father, yes, her biological father, do you want to see him, it would mean a whole lot to him, he really missed you.

Mai, having been adopted by a lovely Vietnamese couple who had moved to Hillwood a while ago and had no child of their own and treated Mai with absolute love, had tried to look for her biological father, of which the only info she ever had about him was that he only gave her up to give her a good life in America and that his name was Thien Hyunh, a name he yelled out to the soldier.

Mai apparently only had vague memories of the man. It was hard, of course, and without much information to go on, she gave up. Helga finding her and telling her about Mr Hyunh was an absolute gift that had dropped on her lap.
Helga had to take ages to convince her, of course. She could understand, Hyunh was a rather common last name in Vietnam. Mai was only convinced when Helga, in a final desperate plea, snapped, “His first name is Thien, and he’s only here because he was told his daughter was here, criminy, he even looks like you, and I’ve only just met you, come on, have a bleeding heart!” Mai, curious, decided to follow this rather radical nine-year-old, who had throughout the entire meeting been freezing through her socked feet in the snow. She tried to offer the girl alternate shoes, but Helga refused. There was absolutely no time for shoes, let’s get a move on.

She had never seen the man much beyond that encounter. When she saw him later, an older, portlier Vietnamese man with a shock of grey hair, wearing a cheesy holiday sweater that he boasted was from his grandkids, she knew that he was happy. Arnold had told her in the car that Mai had tried to convince him to move in with her and her family, but he had refused. He was too used to the boarding house, with its ways, and the people there reminded him of his hometown. He saw too much change in his life, upheaval and violence. All he wanted was stability.

Now, Helga, watching him in his cheesy sweater, smiled. She did it mostly for Arnold back then, but now she just felt happy that Mr Hyunh had family to rely on, blood-related or not.

Oskar Kokoshka… Helga was pretty sure she had seen him in the background of a few important events of her life, like the time they were stranded in school and the Eastern European man was brought along with Arnold’s grandpa to rescue them on the boat. She vaguely remembered him: a weedy, squirrely man, who had a face like a potato and receding hairline, and he could never lose the accent.

She often wondered exactly how someone like him could be an American citizen, and it was only when she was in her twenties and looked back that she remembered that Kokoshka had a wife, a blonde, vibrant woman she heard the man called Suzie a few times, that she had her theories.

Arnold, in the car earlier, had confirmed it: Suzie had met Kokoshka in Austria, and he wooed her with the hope that she would be his meal ticket out of the country to the United States. Suzie thought she was in love, and she married him because of it, and brought her husband back to America. However, growing dissatisfied with her life, and the fact that Kokoshka never treated the marriage as equal, Suzie grew angrier until she finally left Kokoshka in the middle of the night. Oskar never thought anything was amiss until a few days later when someone asked about her and he realised that he hadn’t seen her for awhile either. They found the letter she sent in the bin later. Oskar had evidently found it.

Kokoshka was an older man now, weedier than before, dressed in old but well-mended clothes splattered with paint. In the absence of his wife, he seemed to have finally gotten his shit together, and Arnold said that he worked as a painter now, selling his work to make a living. Thanks to the hipsters, who saw his paintings as art and decided to buy them, Oskar finally knew the meaning of hard work.

He did, of course, overcharge the paintings, just by a little. Arnold had rolled his eyes a little when Gerald brought up that fact. He’d changed quite a bit, but he didn’t become another person overnight. That would have been a miracle.

Helga wondered why she had kept their stories in her head when the men had told her about them on the car trip over. She figured that it might have been because she was an author, and enjoyed speculation on people’s lives. She also figured that at one point, these people were there for her friend at important parts of his life, and it was only fair she learnt about them too.

Now, at the dinner table, all three of the boarders, plus Ernie Potts’ wife Kayla, chatted like they were family and old friends, Hyunh scooping up a plate of fried rice for Stella, Ernie and Kayla.
laughing at a story Gerald was telling, Oskar bragging about his newest art piece and how it was going to," Change the world.” Phil, as he insisted on being called, was grumpily suggesting that Oskar throw his latest creation back where the sun didn’t shine, and Miles was there, at his mother’s side, making sure everyone had enough, scooping dumplings on everyone’s plates and making sure everyone had enough sauce.

Next to her, Arnold was observing everything quietly, chuckling at his grandpa and reassuring his dad that he had enough to eat. Somewhere in her head, Helga figured that her nine-year-old self would be tearing up at the idea that her beloved had a complete family now that adored and loved him. That was all she had ever wanted for him back then, and still did even now.

“So Helga!” That was Stella, who had interrupted her thoughts, “Tell us about you, I think it’s a shame that we know you but at the same time, we don’t, if you know what I mean? What’s happening with you?”

It was such an innocuous question; Mrs Heyerdahl had asked the same question herself the day before, but Helga stiffened. What was she okay with telling Mrs Shortman? Gertie was fine, and the irascible older man Phil would be easy to manage, but what to tell Arnold’s Mother? She didn’t have a good read on her yet if she ever did, and Helga, usually a good reader of people, was tense.

“I’m…not sure,” she said slowly. If she could get Stella to repeat or rephrase the question, it would buy her some time. “What do you mean? What would you like to know?”

Stella smiled reassuringly, “I’m not asking for your life story, Helga,” said the older woman, spooning a portion of bok choy on Helga’s plate. “Just tell us what’s been happening since we last saw you. Arnold told me you were a writer, but he didn’t go into the details.” She shot a teasing smile at her errant son, who was studiously examining the green vegetables on the plate like it was on a test.

Helga laughed nervously. Work was good. Talk about work she could deal with. Work was easier than personal history. “Well, I’m a writer, I wrote a bunch of things, nothing amazing—"

Arnold wasn’t letting her off the hook, however. “Her work’s been featured on the New York’s Bestsellers, and all the kids in my class are reading Our Gang, and the school librarian’s obsessed with her poetry—"

The whole table chorused with admiring words and cheers. Helga, shifting a little in her seat, felt a little proud, but mostly embarrassed. “It’s nothing really, I mean, it’s just graphic novels and books for kids, and the poetry was really pretty self-indulgent—"

Arnold wasn’t letting her off the hook, however. “Her work’s been featured on the New York’s Bestsellers, and all the kids in my class are reading Our Gang, and the school librarian’s obsessed with her poetry—"

“Wait—” Mr Hyunh said in his halting accent, a little less pronounced than before since he had been in the country for ages now, but still present. “You wrote Our Gang? Mai buys the books for my grandkids! Very clever, and very smart!”

Helga was getting a little nervous now but kept her composure. As long as Mr Hyunh didn’t mention anything more about Mai, and maybe less about her work, she wouldn’t be pressured to explode from utter self-consciousness. “It’s nothing, really, I mean, they’re just little things I wrote when I was younger…”
She was right in that aspect. Helga wrote the first Our Gang book when she was 22, bored at work and a little tired of the poetry format she had been working with. Trying to work through her writer’s block, she started wading through some of her old journals and found some of her entries that filled her with so much nostalgia that she decided to try rewriting them as a writing exercise. Pushing it further, she developed a few more entries to full adventures and gave it a bit more pizazz and fictional liberty. The result was the skeleton of the first Our Gang book.

“That’s amazing, Helga!” Miles declared. “You would need to be very good at directions to be a good writer. Which is weird for me, because I get lost a lot of the time.”

Despite herself, Helga asked, “What do you mean?” What did that mean anyway?

Miles nodded solemnly. “Well, to be a good writer, you would need to know your write from your left.”

Helga nearly dropped her fork. Did Arnold’s dad make a …dad joke?

Judging from Arnold’s facepalming, he did. “Guys, let’s not—"

“Well, being a good writer must take guts!” Phillip chimed in, “I would know. When I came out of the Battle of the Bulge, they asked me to write a book about my experiences, and I was so scared I booked it out of there!”

Helga’s eyes widened. There were two of them now. Arnold started waving his hands in a panic, “Guys, let’s not—"

“Arnold thinks we’re teasing you cause we’re horrible people,” Phillip interrupted, “Which is a lie, I’m an emotional man! My name is Phil after all. “

Helga let out a peal of laughter than she didn’t realise she was holding in. Stella cackled from where she was seating. Gerald hadn’t even tried to mask his entertainment, he was face down on the table, slamming the tabletop with his fists because he thought everything was hilarious. Arnold just sighed very heavily into his soup.

When the laughter died down, Ernie Potts, who had been smirking a little at the jokes, started speaking, “Books eh? I thought you were one of them activism types, I’ve seen you running around with a speakerphone on the newspapers a few times.”

Helga was surprised that Ernie Potts knew about her activism. “Oh yeah? Where at?” She was nervous again because activism was a tricky thing to talk about with normal people, especially those that opposed her politics. She barely knew Ernie, so she didn’t know what would be good to talk to him

“The Women’s March in Michigan.” Ernie replied. “We were at …erm…Kaykay, help me out here, where was that place with the pie store we went to?”

“Piebies?” His redheaded wife replied, a confused look on her face. “It could be Windowsill Pies—"

“Or Pies Pies Pies…” chimed Ernie, twirling his fork around. “We saw the protests on our honeymoon there. Hey, Grandma, these dumplings taste a little weak, what did you do, water down the taste?”
Gertie frowned, “I boiled them, of course there’s water in it.”

“Oh right. So anyway, Helga—” the shorter man continued, “You good at it?”

Helga was confused. “At…erm…activism?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah yeah, them.” Ernie waved it off. “Them chicks listen to you, right? I reckon you’re good.”

She didn’t know how else to reply, so the best she could do was, “I…guess?” Seeing Ernie frown a little, dissatisfied at her answer, she replied, “They like me to lead the charge, cause I’m really loud, so yeah, they like me.”

Ernie nodded, a little more pleased. “I can see that. You rallied a bunch of kids to flip over an ice cream truck once, I know you’re good at getting people to listen to you.”

Helga didn’t realise the adults knew that story, and she flushed a little. “It was nothing—“

“She once led the charge to go against Mr Simmons when she thought he was losing control of the class when the school was being flooded.” Arnold interrupted. “The whole class listened to her and revolted against the charge. We used her leadership for stuff like baseball, football and other team games. We listened to her, alright.”

Helga baulked. They were more or less bringing up every bit of bossiness and near threatening she had ever done. Was that what Arnold remembered of her? Did the others remember her as being that bossy? She was proud of her activism and leading the charge for issues she thought were important, but all these comments about her youth and being absolute rebellious were making her second-guess her life choices.

Arnold turned to look at her, smiling, but then backpedalled when he realised Helga looked more upset than anything. “Oh no, Helga, I didn’t mean it like it was a bad thing! I mean that you were commanding and people listened to you, that’s all! You were a leader and that’s why you became an activist. It’s good that you’re using that to bring up issues that people want to hear about. No one would listen to anyone like me—“

“That’s a dang lie, and you know it, Shortman.” She shot back. “People like you loads, that’s why they listen to you!”

“No, but you’re more effective getting people to listen to you!” Arnold replied, “Today was a pretty good example—“

“Ah fuck, don’t bring that up, I was so tempted to drink myself to oblivion trying to forget about it!”

“What fuckfest happened today?” asked Gertie cheerily. She had been watching the entire thing and grinning.

Arnold and Gerald related the entire story to the enthralled table, while Helga winced at the more painful parts of the story, like the part when she told the nerdy fan off. The rest of the table was silent when they finished. Helga braced herself for the polite, “Oh wows” and “Was that necessary though” comments. She sometimes got that from the more restrained folks at book publishing companies and richer patrons, who thought she did activism as a hobby.

“Bitching.” Murmured Kayla, wide-eyed and looking at Helga like the blonde woman had given her
ten thousand dollars.

Gertie was whooping loudly, screaming, “Down with the patriarchy!” Oskar nervously chuckled. Mr Hyunh, Stella and Miles looked amazed, and Ernie gave her an approving nod.

Stella looked at the blonde woman and told her, in all seriousness. “I’m glad you did that. The number of male scientists being dismissive towards other minorities in STEM research is a horribly huge number, and smart people like you leading the charge against stuff like that is what we need.”

Helga blushed, started waving a hand to dismiss the praise, but Stella continued, “If you can, you should consider coming down to our university to talk to the scientists in the STEM departments, we could really use a voice like yours to help lead our human resources.”

“Oh, that would be amazing! “Helga started to say, but then remembered that she was only in town for one more day, and her schedule would be packed with book conventions and tours. She told Stella about her unavailability but added that she could give her a few names in the Seattle area that would be useful to her. Stella exclaimed her dismay but accepted the idea.

Phillip looked down at her and went, “Missy, we could have used you in WW2, them Nazis would have ran.”

Helga burst out laughing. “I could punch one. “she tossed back. “Richard Spencer and his white supremacist friends has been riding my goat, you should come with me to counter protest them sometime.”

“You’re on, One -Brow!” The old man laughed, spitting into his hand and offering it to Helga. Helga didn’t even hesitate, spitting into her own hand and clasping his to shake on the promise.

Arnold was now looking nervous. “Grandpa, you’re 100, do you really think-”

“Shortman, I’m 101, who else had the chance to punch Nazis twice in a lifetime besides Captain America?” His grandpa shot back, “Speaking of which, little man, you may have grown taller, but you ain’t no Chrissy Evans. You need more meat on your bones! Eat more dumplings, you don’t eat enough-”

“Grandpa, I’m full.”

“No, I’m Phil, you’re Arnold.” Phil gently admonished Arnold. Helga chocked on a laugh as Gerald didn’t even pretend to, chortling with laughter.

“Soooooo.” Stella said as she and Arnold were now washing up the dishes. The rest of the family, as well as Helga and Gerald, were in the living room chatting, and Helga’s laughter could be heard from the family room. Arnold didn’t realise he was grinning until he looked back and realised that his mom was grinning too. His grin faltered a little when he saw it.

“Soooooo?” he said, trying to match tones with his mother. It was clear his mother had something she wanted to say, and Arnold had a sinking suspicion he knew what it was about.

“Soooooo? Are you going to date her?” Stella nudged her son in the shoulder. “She’s a very accomplished woman, more accomplished than you are, I must say. Why didn’t you tell me she was
an activist? That makes her even more amazing than what you told me before. If I weren’t already trying to get you to marry her, I would be doing it now.”

Arnold rolled his eyes. His mom could be such a mom sometimes. “Mom, I’m telling you, she’s not interested. What would someone like her be doing with a 4th grade teacher like me? You should have seen her today, she tore down that man and it was glorious. She says how she feels and I’m not that type- “

“Arnold Ignatius Shortman, are you feeling sorry for yourself right now?” the woman demanded. Though Arnold was taller than her, he nearly cowered down when the woman was yelling at him, “You’re not bad yourself, baby boy. Lovely in temperament, beautiful handwriting, little kids love you-”

“Those do not sound like things people would say when trying to impress someone, mom,” Arnold replied drolly. Helga was now telling a story about activism. He wasn’t very sure because the running water was drowning out most of the noise, but he could hear laughter. It must have been funny. “Helga and I are friends. Besides, you heard her, she’s only here for one more day, and she flies back to Michigan on Monday. I’m just happy we’re friends, and that’s the best I can hope for.” He then frowned, as something hit him that he had overlooked earlier. “Also, my middle name isn’t Ignatius. It’s Phillip.”

His mother rolled her eyes, “Well, yeah we know that.” she said, gesturing to herself and her son at the word, ‘we’. “It was a name we were considering for you when you were a baby. Of course, that didn’t work, so I’m trying out middle names for your possible babies. Ignatius sounds dignified, but then you might have to shorten it to Iggy. Ulysses is nice and long, but no one would know how to pronounce it-”

Arnold would have facepalmed himself again, but he had a plate in his hands. He settled for working hard against a bit of dried out dirt at the side of the plate instead. “Did you like her though?” he asked quietly.

Stella whipped her head back at her son. “Of course I do!” she said. “She’s a lot politer and sweeter, but she still has that anger and rage she had when you were young, and I liked her then too. So, does your father. Why else would we make fun of you like this?” She nudged her son again. “Also, I know I make a fuss about you and her a lot, but in all honesty, I’m happy you two are friends. She looks like she needs all the friends she can get, after what happened with her mother and her father throwing her out like that.”

Arnold frowned. “How did you-”

“Gossip tree, Arnold. Besides, we knew when her father came back to Hillwood and so did Olga, but the man never mentioned anything about Helga beyond her being ungrateful. He claimed he threw her out because she was disrespecting him, but of course, there were witnesses, during the funeral. Some of the talk got back here, of course. “Stella frowned. Arnold could tell that, like her husband, she had a bit of a distaste for Big Bob Pataki as well. She continued, “Also, she’s the one who wrote Our Gang? Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“What difference would that have made?” Arnold asked. “You like kid books?” Was his mom’s obsession with trying to get him grandkids taking over her?

“I flipped through a few books when Thien brought his grandkids over.” Stella replied, “I thought they were good stories. Now that I know they were written by Helga though…” she tapped a finger on her chin. “Well, this explains quite a lot.”
Arnold was about to open her mouth and ask what that meant, when a peal of laughter rang out from
the bedroom, and Grandpa Phil’s voice yelled, “Stella! Arnold! Get in here! The girl is going to do
her impression of Richard Nixon!”

“In a minute!” they both yelled.

Stella looked at her son, “So, what’s the plan after this? “ she asked.

Arnold looked at the clock in the dining room, which read 9.35pm. “We still have a good… 50
minutes? Not sure, probably talk for a bit-“

“You shouldn’t let her hang around with us old fogies.” Stella said. “They’re making her do Nixon
parodies, and I love your grandfather to death, but no one should be making Nixon relevant at this
point of time. Take the girl around the place, go up to the rooftop again. You guys should spend
more time together.”

Arnold thought it was a lovely idea, but it had drawbacks. “What about Gerald?”

“Gerald knows what’s all around the boarding house, he doesn’t need a tour-”

“I mean, what about Gerald-“

“What about me?” said the man in question as he strolled in without a care in the world.

Stella filled Gerald in on the plan, and the man gave Stella a raised eyebrow. “If you’re thinking
what I’m thinking-“

“I am, Johansson.”She smirked.

Gerald chortled. Then he yelled out, “Hey Helga, my man’s going to take you on a tour of the
boarding house! Strap in!”

“What? Why?” yelled back Helga. Her voice sounded higher than usual. Arnold hoped her coughing
fit wasn’t flaring up again.

Gerald grinned, “Just cause!”

Arnold whispered fiercely, “Are you coming?”

“Course not, I know what the boarding house looks like,” Gerald waved a hand lazily. “I’m only
here so I can relieve you of your duties to escort our guest, while I chat with your mama here.
Someone has to be the better son, might as well be me.”

Stella giggled, and Arnold grumpily thrust his wet gloves at his evil best friend. If he was going to
usurp the good Shortman son role, he had another thing coming.

Arnold walked into the living room, locking eyes with Helga, who seemed to be sitting between his
grandparents. Helga excused herself from the room, the room yelled their sadness that their favourite
guest was leaving, and Helga promised she would be back pretty soon. There was much rejoicing.

They stood in the hallway outside the living room. An awkward silence fell between the both of
them, and Arnold was the first to break it. “So. You need water before we get on with this tour?” He
asked. “I mean, your coughing fit seemed pretty serious just now-”

“No!”Helga squeaked. She coughed, and tried again, “I’m good, I swear, Phoebe gave me a
checkup just now. Flies are tickly!” she cracked, and Arnold laughed a little, still concerned.

“Well, let me know if you need water, okay?” He asked. Helga nodded, and they climbed the stairs.

“Well, you’ve seen the living room, and the kitchen…” Arnold said, watching Helga ascend up the steps as he did so himself. “It’s really old, sorry. We added a new wing because of the grant we got, and dad did all the repairs himself along with Grandpa-

“It’s cool, “Helga replied. She remained silent as Arnold led her around the different hallways, showed her the new library they opened for Stella and Miles, the study.

She lingered over the photos lining up the hallways. “Your whole family’s history is written all over these walls.” she murmured, looking at a picture of a stern man with Grandpa Phil’s eyebrows.

“Yeah, from what Grandpa said, the Shortmans were from Ireland, and moved to England for a bit at the docks, becoming known for being innkeepers and hospitable people for sailors on the dock. Grandpa’s dad was the one that brought the whole family to Hillwood, and continued the family business of innkeeping, but turned it into a boarding house. Grandpa took over from him after the war.” Arnold said, leaning against the wall. When he was younger and the stories of his missing parents didn’t feel like enough, Grandpa Phil would tell him stories of his own family’s history and some of their brave deeds. He apparently had a great great great grandaunt that disguised herself as a man and fought in the war. It was either that or Grandpa Phil embellished the tale from the Disney movie Mulan.

Helga snorted, “Dock people, huh. The Patakis were ship merchants from Hungary. We were apparently really rich at one point, then decided to take over some other merchants’ territory. It failed, we lost all our money, so our whole family moved to America to get away from our enemies. My dad-” she stopped before she swallowed and continued, “Dad always said that we had to continue their legacy, so that’s why we had to constantly look out for the bottom line.”

Arnold could see that she was looking rather pained mentioning the Pataki family, especially her father, so he changed the subject.

“Did you know mom nearly wanted to name me Ignatius?”

There was a silence. Helga threw back her head and laughed. “Holy criminy. Could you imagine? Ignatius Shortman. They would have tried to name you Iggy!”

Arnold laughed, glad that he managed to get her to laugh. Albeit at his expense, but still. “Can you imagine if we had two Iggys?”

“Fuck, we would have had to tag you two just to figure out which Iggy we wanted. Do you want to be Iggy Pop? Actually, seeing as you were super uncool, you would have been Iggy Bad-”

“Nooooooooo!”

“Or Iggy Azalea, if we wanted to mention Bad Iggys out there.”

The line of joking continued as Arnold walked her all over the house, and up the stairs to his room. He opened the door and jokingly said, “This is where the magic happens!” he joked cornily. He would later slap himself for saying a very cliched line in front of someone he was trying to impress.

Helga was silent as she took it all in, and Arnold could not read the expression in her gaze. Was she
unimpressed? The room was everything to him when he was younger, but he could see or imagine that some others would disagree. His computer was still there, an old 2000 era computer that still worked after Arnold tinkered with the gear and software, the wallpaper peeling a little, the bookshelves were a little dusty. He could still fit in his bed, and the best aspect of his bedroom, the glass windows that let in natural light or showed the night sky after dark was still overhead.

Helga was quiet, and Arnold waved a hand in front of her. “Helga? You okay?”

She shook her head a little, and a bit of light came back, “Yeah, I mean, this is nice!” she said. “I’ve seen your room before, I mean, from the rooftop- that is, during parties-“ she fell silent again as she continued looking around, wandering around the bedroom a little.

“Do you need some air?” Arnold asked, concerned. “Cause the best bit of my bedroom is here-”

He made his way to the bed. Upon looking at Helga’s unimpressed stare, the 29 year old man flushed. “I mean, up here, the steps-“ he gestured towards the inbuilt steps leading up to the roof.”

“Careful, Arnoldo.” Helga said, deadpan. “Here I was thinking you were going to be a scoundrel and take advantage of me-”

If Arnold could flush harder than a fire hydrant, he would not be able to put himself out. “What are you talking-”

“Relax, you fucking boy scout.” Helga laughed. “Come on, take me up.”

Feeling that he wanted a night free from being embarrassed by near everybody, Arnold ducked his head and climbed up, opening the window panel and crawling out. He kept it open for Helga, who followed suit, and tried his best not to look at her anymore in a flushed, really rather humiliating state.

“This is-“ Helga said, looking up and around and feeling silent. Her hair whipped back and forth in the wind. “It looks exactly the same.”

“Yeah,” he said, shuffling his feet. He came up here every once a week to look up at the sky, as it was the only rooftop he could get access to do so. Saturdays were his meditation or thinking time, and he spent most Saturday nights doing so, for at least an hour. Sometimes his Grandpa joined him, but rarely, and occasionally his dad or Gerald, but most of the time, it was Arnold alone.

Helga walked over to the edge of the building, leaning against the short wall to look down at the city. Their building was the tallest point and from where they were, they could see near the whole of Hillwood. “It’s beautiful, “she said, voice low.

Arnold wasn’t looking at the view. “Yeah,” he said, looking back at her. Thankfully she wasn’t looking at him when he said that. He busied himself by walking next to her and doing what she was doing, leaning against the short wall.

“It’s amazing how much this town hasn’t changed at all,” she said. “You would think that we would be used to the constant change, and we’re all grown up and stuff.” She gestured with her hands. “But when you think about it, well, we’re not all grown up. We still like pretty, shiny things, and places that remind you of home. This whole city, the lights and the roads? They’re basically veins pumping the lifeblood of the town all over the place, all the gritty, dark lanes and the angry people. “ She laughed, a little cynically. “I used to think that the heart of the city would be your home or the place you were raised, but I don’t anymore. Besides, that’s subjective.”
Arnold couldn’t help himself. “So what’s the heart of this city for you?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” she said. “School perhaps. I spent a lot of time with you guys there. Maybe Gerald’s Field. There’s one place, but-” she paused. “I don’t want talk about it,” she replied simply.

Arnold figured she meant her house. He thought he could understand why she didn’t want to mention it.

“But-” she said, waving a hand and speaking in a lighter tone.”That’s all in the past! Quit living in the past, football head, it’s a new generation!”

“Didn’t that song come out in the 80s?” Arnold teased. “Wouldn’t that mean that you referencing that song mean you’re part of the old generation too?”

Helga paused. Then she did what she did best: give Arnold a small shove.

It was a small gesture, but Arnold laughed, and they both continued looking down at the twinkling city, not saying another word for another 15 minutes, just enjoying each other’s company.
Chapter 17

Back in Michigan, where Helga and Eugene did university and then subsequently found a new home and careers at, they spent their limited free time working.

Eugene did part-time teaching small children how to dance, and Helga worked as a barista and freelance writer doing copywriting and editing, doing small gigs performing poetry and prose later. In the very spare time they could share, they hung out at the queer bars, and their favourite was one called Peaches.

Helga, who had only kissed two girls and a certain football-headed boy in her life, was still confused about her own sexuality and was thankful for Eugene taking her to the bar and expanding her circle of queer friends. Peaches was one of the few places where Helga could learn about the different aspects of the LGBTQ subculture, and where they were open enough to talk out their issues, their anger and ultimately, about healing and forgiving the areas of life that treated them badly and tossed them aside like trash.

Helga could honestly say she met some of her closest friends from her local queer bar, and the fact that they let her in as one of their own was comforting. She could count the number of times in her life where she was welcomed long enough on one hand, and she treasured them deeply. So letting people into one of the few safe spaces she had was something Helga was very wary about.

Despite the fact that the people in question were Arnold and Gerald, her guard was up, way higher than usual. Gerald was a nice guy that Eugene vouched for, but some people had a limit to how much they could tolerate. That was something she had to learn the hard way. You could be welcomed in society but go too far, like trying to get proper rights or whatever, and get shot down like a lead balloon. And Arnold... she didn’t know at all. She would like to believe he would be cool about it. He was important to a lot of causes actually going forward in Hillwood. But well, just because you were a good activist in one aspect didn’t mean you were aware of all the issues, and sometimes championing your one issue and trampling over others was something she knew some of her other activists did.

So you couldn’t blame her for always waiting for the shoe to drop, beginning when she, Arnold and Gerald had stepped out of Gerald’s car and walked the short distance away to the site Eugene’s gig was in, in a converted warehouse near the boardwalk.

The warehouse, truth be told, was rather ugly to make it as a queer bar and club, in Helga’s opinion. Dark and foreboding, the exterior at night made it moody, unpainted, and covered with ripped posters. The entire area was still lit, of course and music could be heard inside, but if not for the flashing neon sign declaring the building was known as, “The Slash Shipyards”, nobody would have known it was a space where drag performers ruled and one of their specialty drinks was the, “Salty Sour Balls.”

“The what now?” Arnold had repeated, a little in disbelief and a lot more in embarrassment, his cheeks were flushed a dark cherry red. Gerald, who was looking up the drinks menu on his phone, cackled so hard he nearly lost his breath.

“Yeah, Salty Sour Balls.” Helga couldn’t help but smirk. It was fun to embarrass the blonde man, who seemed to flush quite a bit when anyone mentioned anything sex-related. Helga was enjoying it.

“It’s basically their take on the Margarita, frozen sour margarita balls where you crack it open, sprinkle a little salt and then suck out the drink throughout the night. Apparently, if you buy a pair, you’ll get a discount.”
She didn’t think it was possible, but the man seemed to flush even more. It was actually pretty sweet. If she was still a 9-year-old, she would have been ecstatic.

Then again, that was twenty years ago. She was more comfortable teasing the man rather than quietly taking note of how the pink of his cheeks made him seem more angelic and how the lights of the club made his gold hair dance in different colours, pulsating against the music that played against the thrumming heart-

Woah. Where did that come from? Helga shook her head and schooled her probably sappy expression into a more neutral look. She was an adult now, she didn’t have sappy school yard feelings for the most popular boy in school. The amount of sentiment and nostalgia she had on the roof earlier while hanging out at Arnold’s place must have seeped in a little more deeply or something. That wasn’t love. That she knew for definite. That was a force of old habits.

Arnold and Gerald, who were too busy looking back at the drinks menu, didn’t seem to notice which was good. Gerald, who was at the moment breathless with laughter at the Salty Sour Balls, was basically just leaning against Arnold for support, and generally having a great time. Arnold still looked extremely self-conscious, and Helga wondered how he would react to the drink Slippery When Wet. As the menu cheekily pointed out, a lot of things could feel slippery when held in the hand.

The three of them walked up to the bouncer and gave their names, who gave a look at them, looked back down on his list, nodded, and let them in. Helga mouthed an apology to him as they walked in: she vaguely remembered stepping on his foot a few times and making the man cry. The man, a big burly muscle-bound man from New Zealand who spoke with a soft Kiwi accent, steadily refused to look at her.

The interior of the warehouse was totally different from the outside. Flashing lights lighting the dark room, the Shipyard was full of people crowding around, some just hanging out and drinking the night away, some in their own cliques, huddled around tables and chairs. Helga could spot a few groups of patrons chattering, excited and wearing Jinkx Fortuna t-shirts. They all seemed rather excited.

“So what’s gonna happen?” Arnold asked as they made their way to the front, Helga being a little more familiar with the place than the others were.

“ You’ve seen the video clips, right?” Helga said. She had to raise her voice: Saturdays were apparently a booming time for the club (that was when they had their weekly drag shows). A Saturday when Jinkx Fortuna was slated to perform meant the place was fairly crowded with people. “Jinkx is an all-dancing, all-singing sort of girl, like we’re talking backflips, flipflops, cartwheels, one right after another. She does 20 minutes of all of that, and maybe one lipsync and stuff-" 

“Damn.” Gerald whistled, impressed. “Eugene does all that? How does he not hurt himself?”

“Trust me, he did,” Helga said. “But he got better.”

It helped that Eugene, despite the fact that he was secretly a very terrible person who sometimes binge-watched Say Yes to The Dress and Keeping Up with the Kardashians with Helga just to trash their outfits, was a very optimistic guy. Sure, he fell down a lot and got into lots of bad accidents Helga still couldn’t figure out (There was once she came back to see him blinking slowly up at an apartment that looked like it had vomited glitter all over itself. Even Eugene couldn’t explain it.), but he always got back up and got better at it. That, in a way, inspired Helga too to try and be optimistic about her work.
‘Try’ being the operative word here.

Helga was saved from her own head trapping her into her insecurities of her work thanks to Phoebe, who had seen them and made her way across the room alongside her parents. Reba was looked very excited to be there, wearing what seemed to be glitter all over her cheeks, and Kyo was wearing one of the shirts Eugene had gifted him before, a Jinkx Fortuna T-shirt. The party stopped short upon seeing Helga alongside Phoebe’s ex and his best friend and Helga only managed to diffuse the situation by greeting them as normal. Reba and Kyo did the same to her, and greeted the two men cordially. Helga noticed that Gerald had lost some of his normal easy-going charm and had shook Kyo’s hand with a stiffness that contradicted his shaky hands. Kyo was smiling, but not in his eyes.

It seemed that Arnold had noticed it too, and he and Helga automatically shared a look of worry. Phoebe didn’t seem to notice, she and her mother were currently turning towards the stage, chatting away about other things. Helga was about to say something, and she could tell Arnold was about to do the same, when they were saved by Patty, who had seen everything and took the opportunity to say hi to the gang, and introduce herself to Kyo. Tension broken, Kyo had turned his attention to Patty, and Gerald, who had been smiling nervously, had shook himself out of his tenseness and started drooping a little.

Helga nudged Arnold in the arm. “Fuck, I forgot to mention that to Gerald-"

“Gerald’s scared of Mr Heyerdahl, I forgot that too.” Arnold murmured. “I think it was the sword fighting, and the fact that he chopped and sliced vegetables for the fair that one time back in middle school.”

“Cripes, Phoebe mentioned that!” Helga marvelled. “Gerald was a volunteer and he was convinced Kyo was trying to kill him or something-"

“Yeah, Gerald and Kyo don’t get along very much.” Arnold nodded. “Still not too sure why.” To Gerald, he said, “You good, G?”

Gerald nodded shakily. “Yeah man, just…parents of exes, man.”

Helga and Arnold nodded understandably.

Patty walked over to the three of them. “Man, you look like you’ve seen a ghost, G.”

“More like the parents of an ex,”Gerald muttered.

Helga motioned to Gerald. “Come on, tall hair boy, we can go get drinks, I’ll buy you one to cheer you up. You guys!” This was to the other two people. “Find us another table. Phoebe got us one but I think we’ll probably need another.” Gerald nodded and they got orders from the rest of the group before leaving.

With Helga and Gerald gone to get drinks, Patty and Arnold were left to make small talk. Arnold liked Patty: the woman was cool, never took anything too seriously, made snarky comments about the school administration as a reporter on the school newspaper, and at one point gave Arnold and Gerald the nicest review of one of the shows the two tried to put up during their high school years. (Summed up in one sentence: “I could see what they were trying to do, and I appreciated what they were trying to do, but execution-wise, they might have fallen short.”)

“How was dinner?” Patty asked, “Helga do okay?”

Arnold nodded, “Yeah, they love her there. They made her try every cookie afterwards, Grandpa got
her to do a Nixon impression, and she impressed them quite a bit. I think they’re planning to make her a new family member.”

Patty raised an eyebrow, “Nothing bad happened? No…accidents?”

Arnold was confused but told her the answer anyway. Patty relaxed. “Good.”

Arnold decided not to ask what Patty was worried about. Patty had her reasons, and considering the fact that Helga had the coughing fit earlier, he could see why she would be concerned. He decided to change the subject, “Excited about a Eugene performance?”

Patty laughed, “Man, you haven’t lived until you see Eugene perform. Have you seen Jinkx? She’s a powerhouse. One time, she did a lipsync to Whip My Hair? The queen started off the performance wearing a gorgeous wig but took it off to reveal ANOTHER wig under it.”

“That’s a thing?!” Arnold asked, shocked.

“It was amazing. “Patty said wistfully. “That queen snatched everyone’s weaves, their edges, and all the trophies. And the way she whipped that hair around, no one thought that it was fake or glued on. You had to be there to see it.”

Out at the corner, Arnold could see Helga and Gerald at the bar, waving the bartender over. He could see Helga lean against the bar top, smiling a little to the bartender as the female bartender repeated the order. The bartender smiled back and said something that made Helga laugh, ignoring Gerald completely. The two continued their exchanges before the bartender laughed and left to make their drinks.

Patty looked over to where Arnold was looking at. “Oh good, she’s doing it,” Patty said. “We’ve been trying to convince her to try flirting with people or talking to them, and she’s finally doing it.”

Arnold felt two things: a frisson of envy, and also confusion. “Helga’s into girls?” He asked.

Patty looked as though she was about to say something, but was interrupted by Phoebe, who was waving them over. They had managed to find a new table, it seemed, and they had them combined to make two large tables to sit and watch the show at. He was feeling a little winded from the new info that had been dropped on him, but he managed to keep his composure up. Still, sitting there quietly while Patty made conversation with the Heyerdahls and Phoebe, he couldn’t help but feel a little upset.

Here was another reason why Helga was probably not interested in him. She was a crusading, ball crushing activist who wrote amazing stories and was finally getting the glory she deserved. She could get anyone she wanted, literally. He must have been making a fool of himself the way he had been talking to her. Did she know? Was she amused at the fact that he was making a fool of himself?

This. This is why he shouldn’t have crushes on people. Or love people. They come in, they wriggle themselves into your heart, and just when you want to make a commitment, BOOM! Stuff happens! The pain, the gut-wrenching ache! The feeling of your stomach getting hollowed out and leaking straight from the bottom, pouring it all over the floor in the stickiest, pink goo-

“We have drinks!” The voice of the bane of Arnold’s current existence said as Helga and Gerald came back carrying two trays of drinks for their party. Arnold paused in his angsting to look down at the trays, which were full of ... interesting drinks.
“Righty-o, Phoebe gets a Pirate Booty-”

“Taking!”

“Mr and Mrs Heyerdahl, you both ordered the Salty Sour Balls-”

“It takes two to make a thing go right!” sang Reba, while Kyo merely smiled.

“Patty, you are getting the Fuccaneer-”

“Fuck yeah I am,” Patty smirked, grabbing the tall frothy drink.

“Arnold, you said to surprise you, so Gerald and I agreed you should get this. “Helga cackled, as she and Gerald gave Arnold three shot glasses.

The blonde man looked down as the shot glasses in confusion. “What is this?”

“They call it...” Gerald paused for effect as he raised his hands. “The Captain’s Third Leg.”

A pause.

“Is... that good?” Arnold asked.

Helga grinned, “Basically, it’s so strong-”

“You would need a third leg to rise to the occasion!” Gerald completed, and the two of them high-fived each other.

Arnold flushed involuntarily and he cursed himself. He wasn’t a prude at all, what was he doing? How did Helga and Gerald make it so easy to tease him like that? He took the drinks warily from the two of them.

“Gerald, here is your Pants on Deck!” Helga announced and the man took his drink smiling, only to cower a little when Kyo turned over to look at him and his drink.

Arnold, trying to make conversation, asked, “What did you get?” He hoped his tone didn’t betray his emotions.

Helga faltered a little like she was worried about something, but just when Arnold was about to ask if she was okay, she replied, “I got a Bi-rate.”

Huh.

“Bi-rate?” Arnold asked. “Like... good bye and pirate?”

“Like... bi-sexual and pirate.” She said. Her body was tense now, he could see it from the way she was holding her shoulders.

He couldn’t help it so he asked,” But why -”

“Oh, my fuck!” Helga snapped. “Read between the lines! I’m bi, yes! Congrats! I’m sorry I’m not straight, I like girls and boys and I like who I like, and if you and Gerald are going to be all prejudicial, I swear you, two idiots-”

Arnold, usually a very good listener, was currently not doing a very good job of it.
Arnold was so into his thoughts that he only snapped out of it when he realised that Helga was still ranting.

“- cause in case you haven’t noticed, it’s not 1997, it’s 2017, and no doy I’m amazing the way I am, cause fuck you, and if you dare think that I will be into everyone just because I’m Bi I will get the 5 Avengers and Betsy Fucking Ross out of retirement to fight you all cause they’re American patriots and will fight for all the rights of Americans, even the queer ones!”

Silence. The Heyerdahls, who had turned their heads over to watch Helga rant, were drinking their Salty Sour Balls quietly. Phoebe and Patty were looking at them in concern, but Arnold realised they were looking at both him and Gerald for their reaction, waiting for them to react.

Of course, it made sense. They were wondering how he would react and if he did it badly, he and Gerald would get kicked out. The group was very protective of Helga, and he and Gerald were the outsiders. What he said next would be crucial.

He blinked, and looked at Helga, and was struck by how scared she looked, despite the passionate outburst. He sighed.

“Can I try it?” He asked.

“What?” Helga said, all signs of bluster and anger went in confusion.

Arnold nodded at her drink. “Can I try it?” He asked again. “it’s all pink and purple, and I like how the bartender managed to get the colours all nice and not mixed up. I have a feeling I might not have a leg to stand on after mine, and I figure I would like a little taste of it, just to see. That okay?”

Helga, all bluster gone, looked at him again, this time scrutinising and hard. All of a sudden, she relaxed.

“What, think you can’t handle it, Football Head?” She asked. In her voice, he was sure he heard her shaky relief, and also a question that was unspoken but she wanted it answered.

He smiled warmly. “I can handle anything you throw at me, Pataki.” That, he hoped, was the answer to the unspoken question. He was sure she got the answer.

Helga turned to Gerald. “And you?”

“Damn, Pataki, you come up with speeches on the fly!” the man declared, raising his Pants on Deck to her in a toast of deference. “Also, I knew about it before the interview at TalkBuzz, we had to do research on you, remember?”

“Right.” She said, now looking a little sheepish. “Ah yeah, research. I honestly forgot I’m pretty open about my sexuality in interviews.”

The Heyerdahls went back to chatting with Phoebe, and Patty gave Arnold a look of silent approval before she started chatting with Gerald.

Helga took the seat next to Arnold, and the two sat there quietly for a bit before Helga said, “Sorry. I
admit. I was a little worried the whole night and I didn’t know how to bring it up—"

“Totally understandable.” Arnold smiled. “I mean, I get it, it’s your sexuality, you don’t ever have
to tell anyone unless you were comfortable with it.”

“I gotta tell ya, I was worried about you and Gerald too, bringing you two to this place,” Helga
confessed, laughing a little.

“Really?” Arnold was surprised. “Gerald and I are pretty cool—”

“Yeah, but you don’t get it, it’s like…” Helga looked like she was struggling to find the words to
say something, which was weird for him to see, Arnold never though he would see her being this
vulnerable that she couldn’t find the proper words to say something she was clearly very passionate
about. “It’s like…imagine there was something you were so protective of, because you were sure
that if everyone found out you would be prosecuted, ostracised, hurt and maybe even laughed at.
Like for me. I don’t like sharing my heart to many people. People like Phoebe, Eugene, Patty, my
friends in Michigan? They’re my heart, and places like this are part of what makes them happy.
Anyone new that comes in has to be willing to protect that space for them, like I am willing to do so.
It takes ages for me to open up to people, and I’m very grateful if they stay long enough for that to
happen, but to do that, they have to be willing, absolutely willing and able, to wait with me when I
am ready. And I know I can open it but well…”

Arnold absorbed this, thanking his stars and his intuition that he was right. His crush was
meaningless against the heft of Helga’s trust and friendship, and he was absolutely willing to quash it
if it meant Helga felt okay talking to him as friends. That was most important.

”Helga,” and here was the blonde woman turning to him questioningly. “Thank you for trusting
me. And I promise I will try my best not to let you down.”

Helga replied by raising her drink to him and taking a sip.

He really liked Helga and for once, Helga and he were talking normally. No defensiveness, no
threats-

“By the way, if you tell anyone that I threw my feelings all over you, I will eviscerate you with my
nails and my teeth,” Helga said casually.

”Whatever you say, Helga,” he replied.

They both looked at each other and laughed their heads off.

Helga had seen many drag performers, but she wasn’t super sure if she was ready for the hosts of the
party, two drag performers known as Feisty Ol’ Gregg and Stilton Cheeseman.

Apparently, these two were two separate drag kings who became best friends after a drag
competition, and now frequently toured as a double act. Feisty Ol’ Gregg was a performer that
painted lines on their body to make themselves look like an old craggy man, when Helga knew from
Google that the performer was really in their late 30s. Today, Feisty was dressed like a pirate, no
shirt, just a leather vest, and red pantaloons tucked into boots. Feisty also seemed to have managed to
dye his beard in the rainbow colours of the Pride flag, and altogether made a rather beautifully done,
if cranky looking, old man.
Stilton Cheeseman, on the other hand, wore a tailored blazer jacket, complete with spiralling Chinese
dragons and crystals sewn into the eyes. Helga figured that Stilton was meant to be a parody of rich
dapper men, considering the affectations, the references to the good old days, and he kept calling
Feisty, "Old Sport."

Stilton was, as the name suggested, a literary snob obsessed with the children’s book character
Geronimo Stilton. Feisty Ol’ Gregg named himself after his Father, also known as Feisty, and both
of them were popular with the local queer community in Hillwood.

Helga was, admittedly, now pretty obsessed with the two of them.

“How many people are here for our weekly dalliances?” Asked Stilton, who winked. Cheers were
heard. A couple of women and men fainted in the front row when that happened. He was definitely
very charming.

“Yargh gel bleh mwarahhhh.” Said Feisty Ol’ Gregg and some other women fainted while others
laughed. Helga marvelled at the fact that Feisty had fans when he spoke like that, and wondered if
the fans actually did understand what he was saying.

She stole a glance at Arnold, who was laughing and clearly entertained. Gerald was giving the Kings
a look, but it was more a look of confusion at Feisty more than anything, and he laughed at the next
statement Stilton said. “Ah geez, I need tips from these kings.” He nudged Arnold and said, loud
enough for Arnold and Helga to hear.

“And now, all you young lads and ladettes, those in between and without, let’s give a warm
welcome to our first performer of the night: Rosie Cheeks!”

The music blasted out a Robyn song and out came a tall drag queen, wig bouncing, as she took
command of the stage to lipsync the house down. Helga rather enjoyed the performance, though she
secretly felt that she had seen better in Michigan, and watched as the queen stalked around the room,
grabbing the tips that the audience offered. Catching the glance of Arnold, she explained that tipping
was how you showed the performers that you appreciated their act, and Arnold nodded. When the
queen finished her act after two songs, she bowed and left them stage amid cheers.

“When’s Eugene coming up?” Arnold asked.

“Jinkx Fortuna’s after this act.” She replied, as another performer came straight out after Rosie, with
the emcees naming her as Holly Trinity. This queen, who was a stand-up comic, managed to
somehow bring the house down with a series of crass, crude jokes, with subjects ranging from her
weight to her size. Helga, laughing her head off, managed to get a look at Arnold, who was
hesitantly laughing but blushing his head off. That made her laugh even more, and Arnold noticed.

“Same old Helga.” He grumbled, which only made her cackle.

“Hey, I’m not the one being all blushy like a sweet girl on the edge of 17.” Helga smirked. “Also,
you need to finish your third leg, you loser. Come on, drink it down, get some hairs on your chest.”
She nudged him towards the three shot glasses, still undrunk.

The blonde man wrinkled his nose, which Helga thought was rather adorable. Seriously how was
this man not taken yet? “I don’t even know how to drink this. Also, stop being concerned about my
chest, I already have people doing that.”

Deciding to ignore the second statement, because it was way too out of the blue even for her, she
shot back, “Crimeny, you need to learn how to drink properly-"
“Hey, that’s an insult, I drink.”

“Let me guess: beers?” Helga asked. “Beers are easy. Come on, get some complicated shit into your life, you need it. Just-”

She took one shot glass and motioned for Arnold to take the other, leaving one shot glass filled halfway with clear liquid in the middle. “Pour into the glass in the middle when I tell you to.” She instructed, and Arnold did as she said, positioning the glass to pour over the middle just like she did.

“Now...pour!” Both of them poured the contents into the middle and the clear liquid turned yellow and then a clear orange before settling into a darker brown.

Arnold looked at the glass in the middle with much suspicion. “I’m supposed to drink that?” He asked.

“Yeap,” Helga replied.

“Can I refuse to drink this?”

“Nope.”

“How about if I drink half of this and you drink the other half?” Arnold asked, looking a little desperate. “Seriously, I have no idea what this drink is, and it looks suspect-”

“Shortman, Shortman, Shortman.” She said, shaking her head in mock disappointment. “It’s just a drink, nothing more and nothing less.” That did nothing to sway the blonde man, so she relented.

“Split it with me, you wuss,” She said. The man did as she said, pouring half the contents into one of the empty shot glasses. “But you owe me one.” She said. Holding the small glass in her hands, she gulped in trepidation. Despite her bravado, she too was pretty worried about the contents. The menu simply explained it was strong. “Football Head, do this with me, or I will make sure your grandma puts cilantro in all your food.”

“Grandma wouldn’t do it, she loves me.” He scoffed, but even he looked a little unconfident in that statement. He too held the tiny shot glass in his hands. “If we do this at the same time, we can get this over with.” He said.

Helga nodded. “No backsies, Arnoldo. Then, as though she just thought about it. “We’re linking hands for this, wedding style.”

If there were a more embarrassed straight male in a queer club than Arnold Shortman, Helga didn’t know. “WHAT I -"

“I’m not letting you fucking cheat on this, so come on. One for all, and all that shiz, geez. It’s not like we’re really getting married. Come on.”

She wasn’t that sure if she was doing a good thing, but Arnold did as she said. Next to him, she could see Gerald widen his eyes and gesture towards Patty and Phoebe who stopped talking to look over at them.

Focusing on Arnold, she and him raised their arms, linking their elbows together, and both of them looked at each other in the eye before downing the drinks in one swoop.

Regret was clearly the first thing she felt as the burning liquid entered her passages and burned it all the way down. She nearly coughed, and she was certain Arnold was doing the same too. They
unlinked their arms when they were done, and both of them stared at each other, wide-eyed.

Arnold was the first to laugh, and after awhile, so did she. They didn’t do it for too long, of course. Apparently whatever was in it was way too strong for them and they both started coughing their lungs out, which made them laugh even more.

“What the fuck was that?!” Helga gasped, a little croaky.

“I have absolutely no idea.” Arnold rasped, and they both laughed some more. In the dim lights, Arnold’s eyes shone glee and mirth like sunlight through a mossy pond. She could almost feel like taking a dunk in a pond like that.

Helga blinked, but before she could yell at her brain to stop reverting back to being 9 years old, she could hear Stilton Cheeseman announce, “And you don’t need any introduction to our next performer! She’s sassy, she’s classy, her highlighter can nearly be seen from the moon, it’s the one and only Good Luck Charm- JINKX FORTUNA!”

Thank god for amazing friends that help save the day from her brain, she silently cheered. As Jinkx Fortuna came on stage doing a live performance of, “Nightmares of A Sewer Rat” from the musical, “Rats!”, she hoped that this would not be one of those times she regretted being friends with Arnold Shortman.
As Jinkx Fortuna finally finished the last note of her song, her chest heaving as the full weight of singing and dancing while wearing a cincher, layers of stockings and pads, and layers of makeup and powder, the crowd was in an uproar of enthusiasm, cheering her on as she gracefully left the stage.

The Heyerdahls were on their feet, with Reba yelling, “THAT’S MY GIRL!” while Kyo was beaming from ear to ear. Phoebe and Patty were hollering from their seats, and Helga managed to make a loud piercing whistle to whoop on her Best Friend.

Only Arnold and Gerald remained seated. Helga, who had turned around to look at the both of them for their reaction to the performance, frowned when she realised the two of them were not reacting to anything happening.

She was about to wave her hands in front of Arnold when the blonde man finally spoke.

“That... was amazing!” Arnold grinned as he turned to look up at Helga. “Does Jinkx dance like that all the time?”

Helga smiled back. The shiny eyes, the look of absolute joy, it looked like Jinkx had gotten another straight guy to be enamoured of her. “Yeah, she’s always like that. Wasn’t it amazing when she did that thing with the feathers?”

“And that thing when she did that lipsync to that song?”

“Exactly!” She laughed. “Jinkx is, someone would say, an experience. I’d say you’ve got the whole faceful of it.” She looked over at Gerald and did a double take. “Gerald...are you crying?”

When you are in a queer bar or club and you’ve just finished watching a very good drag performance, you would have either one of the next few reactions:

1) You would have walked out confused or afraid of what you have watched.

2) You would have walked out thinking that you had enjoyed yourself a pretty good deal.

3) You would have walked out declaring that you have been baptised in the performance of the Lord, that it was like Freddie Mercury himself that had risen from the grave to electrify your very senses, and that you will never be the same again.

Gerald, it seemed, was operating under option 3.

He was full on sobbing now, gesticulating wildly with his arms. “Mmm, mmmm, MMMPH!” Gerald was whooping, tears streaming so hard that him moving his arms. “That was amazing! Oh holy hell, when she did that thing! And then that flippy thing!”

The rest of the group looked on kindly as Gerald started ranting about how much he had loved the experience, to the point where Arnold had to offer him a hug just to comfort him. Phoebe looked concerned but Arnold didn’t look fazed. Helga figured that this was common.
“Everything is just so beautiful!” Gerald was crying. “I swear, it was like watching fire dance on stage!”

"How many drinks did he have?" He heard Phoebe ask Patty behind them.

"One." Patty replied.

“Erm, Arnold,” Helga grabbed Arnold by the elbow and was shaking it a little urgently. “Should you maybe take Gerald outside or something cause I think he’s a little drunk. “

Arnold winced, “Yeah, I should- get him some fresh air.” He then turned back questioningly. “What about you guys?”

Phoebe had gotten her phone and was tapping furiously on it. “Okay, so Eugene figures he will be leaving after they do the curtain call, but he needs to de-drag and stuff. What say most of us go backstage to congratulate him, and we’ll all meet you outside so we can go and sober up before we get back?”

Arnold agreed, and both parties split up.

As Arnold took his somewhat drunk friend outside, breathing in the air that was beginning to cool due to the changing of the seasons, Gerald was a comforting weight next to him. It wasn’t the first time they had drunken nights trying to sober the other up, but it had been a while since they had last gotten shitfaced.

Not many people knew this but when drunk, Gerald was a maudlin, crying man, a complete opposite from his usual cool, debonair self. Granted, Arnold didn’t realise that Pants on Deck would affect Gerald this much but hey, he had The Captain’s Third Leg. It was strong. Later, he would find out that Pants on Deck, as pointed out in the menu, was so named because it was so strong that people were likely to strip off and run around pretty naked. He would be relieved that his Best Friend hadn’t actually decided to run around naked but that would happen later.

The two of them started walking near the pier, watching the boats go by. Gerald, helped by the crisp air and the bottle of water Arnold brought with him as they walked outside, was starting to sober up and stop crying, which was a relief for Arnold.

“Hey, man, I didn’t mean to cry again.” Gerald said, in a small voice. “It’s just amazing. Who knew that would be little Eugene dancing like that? So amazing, so much like water? Truly amazing. Who knew Eugene could sing like that?”

Arnold didn’t have as eloquent a reaction as his friend did but he was grinning from ear to ear,” Well, we did, remember? He did all those productions in high school and stuff-”

Gerald snorted,” But he hit that high note like it was nothing!” He said, in a rather mulish tone like he wasn’t even sure how he didn’t know about Eugene’s talents. “Even Sheena couldn’t, and she was into musicals as well.”

He stopped short. “What did happen to Sheena anyway?”

Arnold opened his mouth to answer and he realised he had nothing. “Didn’t she…erm…”
“Well…wait she…no that was someone else-”

“Damn, you’d think we would remember-”

The two of them stared at each other, a little embarrassed.

Then Gerald shrugged.

“Well, we’ll figure it out when the time comes. -

“Yeah yeah, I mean she still has family here- “

“Uhhuh, that’s true, I see her Uncle Earl sometimes- What is his last name anyway?”

Silence.

“Did we just refer to a lot of people by nicknames or something?” Arnold asked.

“Possibly. I mean we weren’t even that sure on your last name either, to be fair-“

“What?” Arnold laughed. “That’s impossible, Grandpa said it all the time-“

“To be fair, we all thought it was cause you were pretty short back then, man-“

Arnold thought about it, and nodded sadly. “Yeeaaah okay I can see where you’re coming from.”

The two of them were now looking down at the ground, awkward. “Man, were we super oblivious or something when we were kids?” Arnold asked.

Gerald laughed, “I would say some of us are still pretty oblivious, “he said, nudging at Arnold in the arm. He had wiped his eyes with that same arm earlier so Arnold could feel the wet touch of his hand.

The blonde man looked back, confused until Gerald clarified, blearily “That linking arms with Helga thing, man! What was on with that? It was like you two were in a wedding or something.”

Arnold flushed, but he managed to steadily reply. “I was having issues with the Captain’s Third Leg-which, by the way, thank you for choosing that, I know it was probably you who picked it-”

“Hey, hey, “ Gerald was smacking him on the arm now. “ She saw it same time as me, and we agreed on it-”

“That was the worst drink I ever had, and that includes the time you made me try stout-”

“The point is, I saw you two. You two were totally getting it on. What happened?” Gerald said, arms akimbo, eyes still red but defiantly challenging his Best Friend.

Arnold sighed. He couldn’t lie to his Friend especially when said Friend had been crying earlier, “We were totally not getting it on-”

“You two were totally vibing man! What happened?”
“Weren’t you there?” Arnold asked, resigned he had to even explain, but he figured he had to in order for drunk Gerald to understand. “I was trying to get her not to make me drink that monstrosity. She promised to split it with me. She made me do the handlinking thing so I wouldn’t cheat. It’s a drinking promise, not an actual promise.” He looked at Gerald sardonically. “You and I both know drinking promises should not be serious.”

Gerald winced. Arnold was referring to the time Gerald had started sobbing about Phoebe during college, during one of the more maudlin moods he got in when he had been drinking for a bit. This was during the period of time Arnold himself had broken up with his first serious love and after trying to comfort Gerald, so he too broke down and started crying.

Sobering up between the both of them at that time was not well-realised, as they basically resorted to slapping each other just to get the feeling back in their faces again and they had apparently made a drunken pact that if he and him didn’t get girlfriends by the time they reached 30, they would become celibate monks for life.

Drinking that night proved to not have been a good idea, and they had somehow ended up in a blues club playing, ”More Than A Feeling” and “When Loves Goes Wrong” using the instruments as provided by the club. How Arnold and Gerald somehow managed to remember a song they once heard from a Marilyn Monroe film, they still didn’t really know.

“I think that making promises on cheap vodka was really not a good idea,” Gerald muttered.

“You have that right at least.”

They both sat there for a bit, watching the waves go by.

“I’m a liar,” Gerald said then, quietly. “I’m a lying liar who lies. I wasn’t crying solely because of Jinkx.”

Arnold had suspected that, but didn’t mention it to Gerald. He waited patiently for Gerald to continue.

” It’s just…” Gerald trailed off. “Seeing Phoebe was expected but at the same time, it wasn’t expected. And her parents there?” he shook his head. “Also, fuck. That drink was very strong.”

A pause.

“I swear to you, I thought I had gotten over her.” Gerald said. “But like…today? With her parents there, and Kyo being all mrrrrrgh?” (He had scrunched up his face as he made the noise, which was a cross between a disapproving motorbike and a rumbling bulldog). “Sort of reminded me of back then when we were dating.” He waved his hands around like it would help him focus. “It was like, damn.” He patted himself in the chest. It would have been more impactful if it weren’t for the fact that he had hit the right side instead of the left.

“Do you miss her?” Arnold asked.

“Course I do!” Gerald replied hotly. “Pheebs is totally the One That Got Away.” At this he tried to stand up and sing, “The woah-oh -woah-oh-woah-oh woah-oh!” he tried to belt out.

“You ain’t no foghorn!” was a yell in the distance. “Get outta here before I call the water police!”
“There’s no such thing!” Gerald yelled back. “You don’t know how Katy feels in the song! You don’t know about her life!”

Arnold, who was trying to be the good sober adult, tried to drag Gerald back.

“Arnold man,” Gerald said, finally sitting down and leaning against his friend heavily. “I know you and Helga are going to be friends. I applaud the fact that you two want to be friends. Just… make sure you don’t end up like me. I honestly didn’t want Phoebe to leave. I wanted her to because she deserves to become the best she could be. She’s like…fucking stardust. Glittery sometimes.” He got his head up higher on Arnold’s shoulder. “The point is. If you wanna be her friend, cool. Just make sure that if anything changes, and I mean ANYTHING- you tell her.” He paused for a bit. “You’re very emotional for a man.”

”Thanks, man, good pep talk,” said Arnold.

“I mean it, blondie,” Gerald said, hitting his friend hard on the shoulder. “You feel things. Not afraid to tell the truth about how you feel.”

Arnold smiled. “I got you the first-time man.” He stared out into the sea. “I want to be her friend first,” he said. “She needs one. And I’ll be there for her, just like how I’m there for you and you do the same for me. That’s important.”

Gerald smiled. “Honestly, I think you’re good being Arnold, Arnold,” he said. “Why aren’t we gay? We could totally marry each other.”

“You’re into girls and so am I, Gerald.”

“Fuck, yeah.” Gerald mused. “But we have guy love man. Guy love.”

They both looked out at the harbour, looking thoughtful.

“Is it weird we both came out of a gay club and now you’re leaning on me talking about guy love?” Arnold asked.

“Hey, 21st-century men don’t question their masculinity like that!” Gerald mumbled. “We’re sensitive guys. We cuddle, we hug. We just like girls and we don’t swing that way. We’re just comfortable with our friendship.”

Arnold smiled. The two of them sat out there for a while waiting for the others to get them.

“Your perfect, you’re beautiful-”

“Yes yes, alright.”

“You look like Linda Evangelista-”

“I knew that but go on-”

”You’re a model, everything about you is perfect, did you stone those tights?”
“Guys!” Eugene laughed, looking exquisite and smiling cheerily as Phoebe and Helga danced around him, chanting the lines of Eugene’s fave song that the group did when they managed to get together after a successful Jinkx Fortuna show, all while Patty filmed them while laughing in the background.

It was a ritual that Helga did for Eugene every time Jinkx finished a successful show, and Helga made Phoebe practice it especially for Eugene the last time they were together. According to Eugene, the ritual had always brought him good luck and he always managed to get someone to dance with him singing the first few lines of the song after every performance.

Theatre geeks always had a ritual they did before or after a performance, Helga thought fondly as she grinned at the beautiful drag queen standing in the middle of the dressing room, strangely empty except for them, while Phoebe and Helga were dancing and moving their hands in good humour.

“Jinkx Fortuna, your smile is beautiful!” both women concluded and laughed, all while Jinkx pretended to preen and smile, flashing the pearly whites that Jinkxy was known to have, waving her hand back and forth. Then she laughed and Jinkxy Fortuna was Eugene again, earnest, diva-ish, and adorable Eugene.

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“That was amazing!” Patty said, stopping the video and looking over at the group. “Beautiful performance, as always, Genie.”

“Why, Patricia!” Eugene pretended to blush and fan himself, “Such words! I am already taken, as you can see—”

“You were amazing, Jinx.” mumbled a new voice that took them all by surprise. Caleb the hipster was hanging back and looking bashful, one hand on his beanie and the other in his pocket. Helga and Phoebe, upon spotting Caleb, turned to smirk deviously at the slowly blushing for real Eugene. Patty, who hadn’t been filled in on the Caleb situation, but who was very very observant, was grinning slowly as she put two and two together.

“Should we, erm—” Patty started to speak.

“- leave you two alone?” Phoebe completed. “I suggest you say hi to my parents first so I can drive them home and you two can keep talking if you want.”

Helga directed a shit-eating grin at Caleb. “Caleb, I give you- and don’t forget to bring her back when you’re finished with her- our Toast of Mayfair-, or should I say, our queen of the glean—”

“I know where to take Eugene back later.” Caleb smiled shyly.

“Absolutely fabulous.’ Helga beamed. “Now give the Heyerdahls ten minutes, they have words for our girl.”

Phoebe brought her parents in to say hi to Eugene and Helga and Patty walked out, both leaning against the wall outside the dressing room door, waiting for Phoebe and her parents to finish what they wanted to say to Eugene.

“You know, Arnold handled that thing pretty well.” Patty began casually. “Don’t you think so?”

Helga leaned her head back, laughing. “Yeah. Maybe that’s the way to do it. Yell at people and threaten to fight them to take you and your sexuality seriously.” She threw a droll look at Patty. “If
only that were the way, huh?”


Helga was quiet. “Yeah, what about it?”

Patty replied. “You sure you don’t have feelings for him?”

Helga was very resolute in what she knew she had and hadn’t. “Nope.” she said. “Arnold and I are only friends.”

Patty studied her. “I’m glad.” she said. “You two could make a good couple-”

“I thought you said you were glad we weren’t a couple!” Helga cried.

”Let me finish, oh my god.” Patty raised her eyes up to the ceiling. “I’m glad you two are friends, and that you and him did that handlining thing.” she turned back to look at Helga. “I think it’s a sign you’re trusting people more. And if that’s the case, and judging from what I saw just now, you flirting with the bartender chick? I think you’re ready to go back out there.”

Helga turned a hopeful glance at Patty. “You think so?”

“I know so.” Patty smiled. “You’re my fave friend. And no matter who you choose, I would support you no matter what, even if you date…urgh, fucking Greg at my work.”

Helga laughed. “Pattinia, darling, honey badger, you’re my third fave person in the world-”

“Third fave?” Patty replied, raising an eyebrow. “I’m insulted, Jezebelicious.”

Helga laughed some more, just as she received a text message on her phone. Pulling the text message up, it turned out to be Arnold.

Hey, Gerald’s feeling a little down. Hate to say it, but we might have to skip on sobering up. I’m going to take him home. Do you have anything in my backseat you may have left behind?

Helga was a little disappointed, but she typed back, Nope. We’ll still see you tomorrow though, right?

The reply came back swiftly.

We wouldn’t miss it for the world.

Helga could actually imagine the tall blonde man smiling down on his phone warmly as he typed that message, and she shook off the feeling that there was something she might have been missing out on.

“Where did your better half go?” Helga asked Arnold the next day, sitting at the table and chair near the convention halls grumpily. “Aren’t you two joined at the hip or something?”

Arnold chuckled, then winced. Despite the fact that he only had one drink the night before, everything seemed a little louder than usual. Laughing seemed to make it worse. “He’s very
dehydrated from the drinking and the crying, and not getting much sleep before he got up again made him cranky, so I think he’s yelling at Tim and Sam.”

Helga looked at him as though he were speaking Greek, so he rephrased, “The blue haired kid and Glasses Guy.”


Arnold nodded, “He did that to you too?”

“Does he do that to everyone?” Helga shot back.

Arnold nodded again and Helga let her head thunk straight down on the table. “I hate every being and everything.”

At this point, Arnold produced a water bottle that he had snagged from a volunteer somewhere, and placed it in front of the blonde woman. Her head shot up and grabbed the bottle. “You’re a life-saver, Football-Head.”

Opening the bottle, however, proved to be too challenging in her current state. She growled in frustration before thrusting the bottle back at Arnold, who gamely took the bottle and opened it easily.

Helga looked at him in shock. “Fucking hell, are you some sort of genius of bottles or something?”

Arnold replied, in his sensible manner, “Why would I be a genius of bottles? I just open them. It’s not rocket science.” He sat down opposite Helga. “Do you want coffee or something?”

Helga murmured something that Arnold interpreted as, “Kill me and release me from this hopeless existence” so he laughed.

“I can’t get you coffee if you don’t use your words, Helga.” He teased.

Helga murmured something again that Arnold managed to interpret as, “Caramel Macchiato, 2 shots of espresso, crap ton sugar.” He wasn’t very sure on the last bit, but it figured it might be safer to get sugar packets instead.

He went to the food trucks and got Helga’s order, and one plain coffee for himself. On an impulse, he also bought Helga a doughnut. He vaguely remembered that she liked them. Pink ones he went with because she did wear a lot of pink when she was a kid, so she wouldn’t be too averse to the colour, right?

The woman in question was still slumped over the table when Arnold got back. He gently placed the doughnut and the coffee drink in front of her, alongside the sugar packets. She didn’t respond. Arnold had to gently shake her shoulder to get her attention.

She looked up blearily and the first thing she noticed was the drink. “Fucking ace. “she gasped, grabbing for the paper cup. She took a sip and sighed, “Coffee. Bringer of life, bitter dark love of my soul. Please take my eternal life and my babies. I will sign my property over to you.” She was trying her best now to hug the beverage as much as she could.

“Hey, hey, it’s still a bit too hot, maybe don’t do that, “he said gently. He pushed the brown paper bag that held the doughnut in front of her. “Eat something. You might feel better.”
Helga, who had finally noticed the paper bag, was now looking at it suspiciously. “What’s in it? “ He didn’t reply. just gestured towards the bag again. 

He watched her open the bag warily, and then grinned as she visibly perked up upon looking at the doughnut. “ACES, YAS THANK YOU.” She cheered. “Wait, is this strawberry? I can’t eat this- “

“Nope.” Arnold smiled. “Just plain old frosting. Pure unadulterated sugar.”

As soon as he had said no, Helga had snatched the doughnut away from him and had taken a huge chomp of the doughnut just as Arnold had said the word sugar.

“GAWD DANKE.” she said while chewing. “It’s so goooood.”

“You’re welcome. “He grabbed his own coffee cup and raised it to his lips. He didn’t enjoy the taste much, but he figured it was better than nothing.

“Did you manage to get home okay afterwards?” Helga asked after she had consumed half the doughnut and had lost some of the dullness in her eyes.

Arnold nodded, “Yeah, we walked home, our place wasn’t that far off. Gerald got sober on the way back.”

Helga laughed. “I was wondering- is he okay?”

Arnold told her the entire story. Helga whistled when he was finished.

“Damn. Never thought Gerald of all people would be crying over that. “Helga murmured.

“Should we do something?” Arnold asked.

Helga thought about it and shook her head. “Nah. It’s them after all. Let them do what they choose. We shouldn’t interfere.”

Arnold nodded. They both sat there in peaceful silence.

“So, what’s the plan for today, anyway?” Arnold asked.

Helga sighed. “I have to make amends. The organisers were apparently not super happy I had nearly got that poor fan lynched by the mob of angry fans, so I have to do a meet and greet and a photo opp or something. One of those things. It’s a fucking trifle. “She took another bite of the doughnut. “I fucking love you, doughnut.”

Arnold laughed. “So… think you would need a YouTube presenter and his amateur video-cam guy to run around after you at some point?”

Helga snorted, nearly choking on the doughnut. “Well, at the very least, I’m lucky I have the better ones. ” she teased. They both laughed.

“You know what? I’m glad I came back.” Helga continued. “I didn’t want to come back at all- “she paused. “How much do you know what happened with me and the family?”

Arnold hesitated. Then he went for the absolute truth. “A little.” He admitted. “I saw an interview, and one of the comments mentioned a bit of stuff.”
Helga let the words sink in for a bit. “I was pretty open in a few interviews about some of the subject matter, “she said. “Not because I didn’t care or anything, it’s just…between you and me? I’m sick of secrets. I wanted to be open. Sure, some of it did make me even more upset, but I got it out there.” She sipped her drink again. “Is it bad if I can’t get into the full details of it right now?” she asked. “It’s- it’s just a bit hard. “

Arnold nodded, understandingly.

“Good,” Helga said with resolution. “The point is, this whole week? Less horrible than I imagined. I was expecting dad to confront me, or someone I use to hurt come after me and tell me I don’t deserve any of the stuff I worked for- I nearly got found out by Stinky by the way.”

Woah, that he didn’t expect. “Stinky Petersen?” he asked.

“Yeah, he was the Uber driver. “Helga rolled her eyes. “He didn’t recognise me or Eugene, and I faked sleep so I could listen to what he was saying. Did you know he’s an eco-farmer now? It’s one of the hipster initiatives or something to grow an urban garden or something.” She snorted as something came to her. “Ah shit, what if he’s a weed farmer?”

Arnold mulled it over. “I honestly wouldn’t put it past him. Why was he Ubering then, if he makes money from farming?”

“Something about how the driving makes him happy or something.” Helga shrugged. “He earns a little extra cash, he takes it back to the farm, he grows more carrots and then he’s happy, gadzooks. Or something. I wasn’t paying attention.”

Arnold smiled. “It’s funny how we’ve all come from being kids, huh?” he said. “Can you imagine us, sitting here, being friends?”

“Exactly!” Helga laughed. “Like, fuck, can you believe it? We’re like…20 years older. We’re going to be 30 next year. And it feels like we’ve honestly haven’t grown older at all, do you?”

Arnold pondered over the question. “I can honestly say I feel a little more tired. “He said. “I like what I do, but it can be difficult. And I don’t get that much spare time for myself until June. And then even when that happens I’m busy. Summer camps in school, extracurricular activities, listening to kids…It’s like I’m just keeping myself busy safeguarding other people’s childhoods until I die. I don’t have that much time to just…be me again.” He looked back at her. “Does that make any sense?”

Helga looked at him in the face. “What the hell, man?” she said. “That was fucking depressing, and coming from you, that’s a fucking call for help.” She stood up. “Today, you and me? We’re going to have fun.”

Arnold stared back at her. “What?”

“I mean it! “Helga said. “You used to be chirpier about being a kid, I remember you were the kid who taught Lorenzo how to be one. And then afterwards you became a little mini adult, being all sensible and doing the right thing. Which, by the way, not wrong at all? Just that you need to have fun not being our dad. Now, this?” she waved a hand over Arnold’s general direction. “This makes me sad. You’re good looking, but you’re also fucking sad. You and I are going to be fucking geeks for the day. You like that Oversee nonsense, right?”

“Overwatch.” He said, with amusement.

“Right, that. “she waved it off. “We’ll go see a tournament today. You can watch if you want. Then
you and I are going to all the merch and get tons of stuff, and they have an oculus rift at some point for Pacific Rim. Then we’ll get ice cream, eat tons of chips, fuck having sensible dinners- We’re going to be kids today. Gerald too. We’ll do the nonsense adulting stuff, but we will have fun shit afterwards. I refuse to see you this sad doing adult things. And if Gerald is going to be sad over Phoebe and missing her? He’s joining us. “She marched over, grabbing him by the arms and strong-arming him towards the convention halls. “We will have fucking fun today! “she yelled.

If the rest of the convention remembered seeing a blonde couple and a black man dragging along a hipster and a tech nerd, they would have remembered how much none of them acted or were adults. They would have remembered seeing all three of them screamed at the laser tag show, taking turns so that they would all be able to manage the camera and play at the same time. They would have remembered seeing the three of them chomp down on hot dogs and ice cream, and then complaining the rest of the day about how eating them both at the same time was a horrible idea. They would have remembered how the blonde man was laughing a lot, the woman kept smirking and yelling at the blonde man to shoot properly, for fuck’s sake, and the black guy, finally smiling and laughing at the both of them. They would have bought tons of stuff. They would have remembered them being happy.

Arnold would think back to this day a lot later in life. And he would declare to himself that yes, he did have fucking fun that day, and it was thanks to Gerald and Helga. Well, that was a bit of a lie. Only his brain would know that it was Helga that helped him have fun that day.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter would probably be three months later. Because why not?
Chapter Notes

The time jump to 2018 (or a few months) happens in 3...2...1....

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

So class was fun today.

Even if no one actually thought that in the classroom of 4th Graders in PS118, their form teacher was having a pretty great day. He had good reason to.

“Class!” Arnold yelled as an announcement to the class at 2.30pm. “I have a great surprise for you-“

“Is it that you’re going to give us money, Mr Shortman?” Asked a small white kid in the front of the class.

“Erm, no, Theophilius-“

“Are you planning to teach us about ritual sacrifices of the Aztecs, Mr Arnold?”

“No, Freddy.”

“Are you planning to propose to Ms Nadine?!” Screamed a girl in the front row.

All Arnold could do was stare at the girl in question, blankly. If he was proposing to Nadine, this was the first he had heard of it. “What? Where did you hear that from-“

From past experience, Arnold knew elementary school kids. At age 10, children were usually rather good at taking information that they had been presented with, analyzing, and coming to conclusions that were, most of the time, reasonable and good.

However, these were 4th graders from Hillwood. Often, they went with the outrageous. And these kids took his surprise as confirmation of their theories.

“OH MY GOD MAD TAD WAS RIGHT!”

“I owe Michelle ten bucks, noooo.”

“SIR YOU CAN’T MARRY MS JONES, YOU’RE OUR TEACHER!” Yelled another girl.

Half the population of the class, swept up by the mania, started sobbing. Most of them were girls but quite a few boys had suspicious glints in their eyes too. In another time, Arnold would have been a little touched.

Now was not that time.
“I-what?” Spluttered the tall, sincerely confused blonde man. “Guys! I am not getting married! Where did you hear that from?”

No one was listening to him, and so when his computer started playing the track that signalled a video call was coming through, Arnold patched it through and turned to his caller with a resigned smile.

”Hey, Helga,” he greeted wearily from his table. The class was too busy crying and shouting to realise that the projector was currently showing a woman who was showing concern and confusion at the pandemonium currently occurring in the classroom.

“Arnoldo?” she said slowly, taking the entire scene in. “What’s …happening?”

“We might have to reschedule,” he said. “I wanted to do this talk with an actual author so that they can get some tips for their writing assignments, but there seems to be a misunderstanding—”

“MR SHORTMAN CAN’T GET MARRIED TO MS JONES, HE’S STILL TOO YOUNG!” sobbed an Asian girl in the background, who was now clutching and sobbing into what seemed to be his school faculty photo he had taken for picture day last year.” HE’S JUST TOO YOUNG!!!”

Helga started laughing, “Christ, Shortman. Control your kids. I’m going off to laugh at your choices. Talk to you later!”

Arnold nodded as his way of goodbye, and Helga hung up on the call. She was still laughing as she hung up.

He now turned back to his pandemonium of a class, and sighed.

Being a teacher was fulfilling but also a thankless job.

Nadine, the traitorous cad that she was, was also laughing at his ass back in the staffroom later that day.

”Oh my god!” she chortled. “You? And me? Married? What delusion! What mirth!”

And then she went to cackle some more. Arnold was thankful that she didn’t bring her snake to school that day. Peaches had a tendency to look at Arnold like she thought he was hilarious and Arnold was really tired of being treated that way.

Nadine, thankfully, had finally stopped laughing after a good 5 minutes, and wiping the tears from her eyes, she turned back to Arnold. “Okay, I’m serious now, I swear!” she said, while her eyes told him otherwise. “How did your class wrongly believe that you and I were an item?”

Arnold sighed as he recounted the entire incident.

His class, after finally calming down from the hysterics, were willing to give him answers to his questions.

”Sir, sir!” the tall boy, Frankie D, was waving his hands around. “It’s just that for the past three months—”

“Three months, 1 week and 5 days.” supplied another kid, Gracie Wong. She was very into numbers.
“Yeah, what she said!” Frankie D gesticulated some more. “Like, you’ve been behaving really weirdly!”

Arnold sighed, because he had a feeling he knew what they were talking about. Yet, being the teacher that he was, he opened his mouth to reply. “Like how, Frankie D?”

Before Frankie D could answer, another kid, the one who had been screaming about how he was too young to get married, yelled out. “You keep smiling too much, Mr Shortman!”

And that set off the class as each kid started yelling out their own observations.

“You keep looking at your phone a lot!”

“And then laughing way too much!”

“You’ve been reading poetry!” yelled a boy. “Only girls and people who are in love read poetry!”

Arnold was about to correct the boy on his misconception of poetry readers, but the yells continued.

“You like staring out when it’s raining, sir!”

“You’re making us do Romeo and Juliet for the school play! Only people in love like that show!”

“Once, you got so frustrated, you started eating chocolate, and we know people who are in love eat chocolate!”

There were more, some getting a little more outrageous than the ones before. Arnold had to silence the class again before they started yelling out more embarrassing things.

“So…what does this have to do with Ms Jones?” he asked. Despite himself, he was curious on how they arrived at that conclusion.

This time, the class was quieter. Only Gracie raised her hand and Arnold took one breath to steady himself before he motioned for Gracie to speak.

“Sir, on numerous occasions, when you started looking embarrassed, we realised that on a good 45% of the time, Ms Jones was there, and whenever she was there, she and you seemed to be having a very good time,” she said, pushing up her glasses as she spoke. “You and her hang out all the time in school, and she laughs a lot when you are around. The 5th graders have reported that Nadine was sporting new jewellery, and someone saw you looking at a jewellery store at one point. She and you have a lot of inside jokes, and sometimes we see her leaning against you and asking you to marry her. It just seemed like a logical conclusion.”

Nadine was not laughing at him now. “Okay, that’s scary. These children are very observant.”

Arnold nodded.

“Were we ever like this?”

“Honestly, Nadine? I’m not sure.”

“I mean, they actually realised I’ve been wearing a new ring on this finger?” Nadine asked, raising her left hand to show that the 5th graders were correct that she was wearing a ring, but wrong on the origins of the little gold circle. “I just proposed to Frankie, I didn’t know it was pretty obvious—”
Arnold smiled, “Honestly, you shouldn’t have to worry. You’re in love, and it shouldn’t be a bad thing. Maybe stop proposing to me in jest, and we can reduce the number of misunderstandings already.”

Reassured, she smiled, and then started laughing again. “But seriously, oh lord! If only these kids know that it’s not me you’re smitten with…”

Arnold tried to get her to shut up, but Nadine continued. “You’re totally in the raptures of luuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuurve!” she finished, stretching out the vowels with the absolute lusciousness of someone enjoying herself way too much.

Arnold let his head collapse onto his arms. “Please, Nadine, don’t do this-”

“…You and Helgarina have been texting up a storm, and you have bought all her poetry books, and writing in all of them-”

Arnold didn’t bother lifting his head, just made a noise that could easily sound like, “Kill me, kill me now.”

“And then she kept texting you about her fledgeling Tinder dating exploits and you got so frustrated you ate my box of chocolates from the pantry-”

“Hyyyyyyyyyyh.”

“And then let’s not even get started on the stuff they didn’t even cover, like the fact that you two texted each other loads during the New Year’s Eve party I threw-”

Arnold decided that making noises was now way too much of an effort.

“And the fact that you have been binge-watching a lot of videos that involve her in some way, like the stuff from her university that someone put off, which, bee tee double-you, stalker much?”

Maybe he could dissolve into the table if he kept his head down as long as he could.

“Every time you watch a video you either get a really goofy look on your face, or you start blushing up a storm, like that video where she was in suspenders, a tube top and singing-”

That had an explanation. Helga once mentioned in passing that she did Cabaret as a musical back in university, in a role that was protested against by the conservative student groups but still went on. Arnold was lucky, someone had put up a video taken from a cell phone from that show, which was a little grainy but didn’t take away any of the performance quality, and he started watching the opening number hoping to find Helga as one of the actors.

At one point, he was startled when the Emcee who was singing had actually named a Helga as one of the cabaret girls at the Kit Kat Club, and was miming spanking the girl in question due to her, ‘misbehaviour’, but after rewatching the entire scene, he realised that Helga was not actually playing Helga the cabaret girl, but the Emcee role.

Dressed in a minimalist fashion, long coat covering suspenders, a bound chest and a lacivious smile, Arnold was blushing up a storm when he realised that Helga was putting her predatory smirk on full force, and fondling all the performers of the club, no matter their gender.

The part when she was fondling two guys in their junk area was when Nadine had caught him. She had decided to spontaneously drop by for dinner at their place, barging into his room with no sense of decorum, and watched in a demented glee as Arnold, embarrassed, had slammed the laptop shut,
but not before she managed to get a full glance of what she was seeing. She had never stopped teasing him since.

The only thankful part of the entire situation was the fact that he was at his house when that happened, and Gerald was the only other person that knew about what happened.

That did not stop Gerald and Nadine from high-fiving each other the whole night and smirking at their long-suffering friend. Arnold was never the same since.

"-AND LASTLY- Arnold, stop doing that, your head will merge with the table at this point- You and her have movie dates!"

Arnold did try to lift his head at this point to save his dignity, “I do not-”

“Please, Gerald and I are total buds now, he’s been telling me that you and her have been watching shows every Friday for the last month!” Nadine yelled triumphantly. She pointed at him, “J’accuse!”

Arnold sincerely wondered if the past 3 months after Helga had left Hillwood was mostly a test by some being out there who wanted his sanity.

Nadine wasn’t wrong though. For the past month, Arnold had made it a habit to stay at home every Friday so that he and Helga could have their movie club together. One of them would video-call the other, who would have already prepped the movie or tv show that they would be watching on the living room television, and they would spend time watching and comment on the show together. It was almost like they were in the same room, despite the time difference, and Helga kept rather late hours so she was okay waiting for Arnold at his 8pm which was her 11pm and both of them watched shows for at least three hours before they went to bed.

To Arnold, it was fun. Helga was sharp as a tack, and her comments had actually made certain movies they watched feel much more memorable and funny. Arnold, to his own surprise, joined in with his own comments, and soon both of them were swapping comments and laughing like old mates. Arnold wouldn’t admit it to Nadine, but he always looked forward to the end of the school week.

“So how did you resolve the whole thing in the end?” Nadine asked.

“Guys, guys!” Arnold had finally yelled. “Let’s get things clear- I’m flattered that you all worry about me, but I am not marrying or in love with Ms Jones-”

“Don’t leave us, Mr Shortman!” a kid begged. “You don’t get it, the 5th graders are terrified of her! She’s apparently so smart she had trained the bugs to spy for her, and she’s got that snake that does her bidding! She’s a Parseltongue!”

“She’s not just a Parseltongue!” another kid retorted. “She talks to spiders! She’s really scary!”

“Please don’t marry her, Mr Shortman!” Jayden, his most anxious student, cried. “I think she’s very pretty but if you marry her she’ll be our step-teacher!”

“Gone at such a young age!” one of the girls was sobbing. “Sir, you’re too good looking to get married!”

Arnold pinched the bridge between his nose. Could he just go home soon? It was a Friday and all
he wanted to do was get out of the class. Never had he ever envied the children more for being able to go straight home after the clock struck 3.

“Class.” he said again. “We have to set some boundaries.” The classroom quietened down, which was an actual blessing. Arnold could feel the veins in his head throbbing.

“Firstly, thank you for being so worried about me.” Arnold flashed a smile. “I think the fact that you are so emotional makes me feel better about being your teacher.”

The class actually did seem a little more lighter after hearing that.

“Secondly.” he looked down at all of them sternly. “Ms Jones is a good teacher, and she is one of my friends, but she is not scary, and I am not marrying her-”

“Is ‘friend’ a code word for girlfriend, sir?” asked Theophilius.

“No, Theo, no.”

“Sir, will you ever get married?” A girl called Fern asked tentatively.

Arnold blushed, but he replied steadily, “Not now. Maybe one day, Fern.”

“Is that code for you being gay sir?”

“FREDDY.”

Nadine was laughing again.

”Man, your kids are very inquisitive.” she giggled.

“I just told them that respect of boundaries went both ways. If they didn’t want me up in their hangout spots all the time, then they should do the same for me.” he said tiredly. “They got it, I think. I only managed to tell them what I was originally planning right before the bell rang, so I think they understand that we will be doing this again next week Friday. Hopefully Helga understands.”

Nadine laughed. “Sooo… trying to insert Helga more in your life huh? If this were me, I would say you’re trying to get them to like her so you can get their approval or something.”

Arnold, now too tired to reply, decided to let his face touch the nice flat surface of his work table again.

“Also, you gotta do something, the kids in your class are so strangely devoted to you that I think you need to counsel them. They were crying because they thought I was marrying you and taking you away from them.”

A sudden thought struck her and she grinned, “Oh shit, you’re totally their zaddy. You’re decent looking, so I bet half the class has crushes on you, cause you make sweaters and plaid look good, you take care of them like you’re their actual blood relative- Wait, does this make me their stepmom? I don’t want to be the 4th graders step-mom! You totally want Helga to be their step-mom!”

When she realised that Arnold was not reacting to her, Nadine walked over to make sure that Arnold was still breathing, then took out a phone to snap a picture of how pathetic Arnold was being at the moment. “Loser….at … work…” she muttered to herself, typing the caption out after uploading the photo for her Instagram story, adding stink lines and a TGIF sticker to it.
She then glanced back, scoffed, and left him to his own misery.

”Poor white guy. Absolute issues.” she muttered as she left.

Waiting at home at night for Helga to call that night, Arnold weighed his thoughts about what happened that day.

Nadine was right on a few things.

While he had originally wanted to keep his ties with Helga more platonic than romantic, the past three months did not help him with that initial idea. On the contrary, somehow the both of them started talking every day, whether commenting on social media or texting, and Arnold’s crush on Helga seemed to grow a little more stronger. He was always ready to reply to Helga’s texts pretty quickly after he received them, he sent her texts of things that reminded him of her when he was bored, and somehow it had become a habit of them just chatting and shooting the breeze.

Somehow, it had started with a phone call two weeks after Helga had left Hillwood to go back home. While he had received texts from her every now and then, a phone call was not something he was expecting, and he picked up the call hoping that it wasn’t an emergency. “Helga?” he asked,
putting the phone on speaker as he continued what he was doing, which was retooling a remote.

It turned out that one week after returning to Miltown, she went back on the convention circuit in another state. Holing herself up in her hotel room with her laptop, she was now bored out of her skull with no one to talk to while working on her panel discussion talking points. All her friends back in Michigan were asleep, Phoebe was back in the hospital working shifts that meant no one would talk to her, and Eugene was out performing in a club. She vaguely remembered something about how Hillwood was behind by a few hours, so she tried her luck calling Arnold.

"I hate this," she complained as Arnold was screwing the remote back together. "Why do I have to do panel discussions? I don't know what to tell people about my thoughts on anti-heroines, and I don't sound intelligent at all, I just want to say, ‘What he said’ and hope that's enough, but noooooooowooope. This bites! I'm a millenial! I used the word totes many times in a few of my essays. I'm sometimes obsessed with avocados on toast! I don't know things!"

"That's not true, Helga," Arnold chided gently. "You're smart. I've seen a few articles of yours online, they’re really intelligent. You’re giving yourself too little credit again."

"All lies, I swear." Helga had grumbled, yet Arnold had the sense that she knew that he was right. "If that were true, why can't I figure this shit out?"

"Maybe you need someone to bounce ideas off." he suggested, putting down his screwdriver. "I've been know to be a good listener, tell me everything."

That was the beginning of their phone calls.

They ranged from conversations about books and topics, when Helga needed to bounce off her emotions when she was alone in her lodgings and wanted a listening ear, to talking about more trivial things like television shows, books, and everyday life. Arnold filled her in on the goings on in his class, she told him about her life and the funny people she saw that day in the convention.

Arnold had no idea when it happened, but when he caught himself staring at his phone for no reason other than hoping Helga would call, he knew he was having it bad. He didn’t act on his feelings, of course. Which was good, because Helga had made good on her promise to start meeting more people.

"Patty suggested Tinder." she had told him at one point, sitting in her room, holding her phone. "I put it on both sexes. Which is just weird. On this app, it’s full of guys being all, ‘Hi, love life love the gym want to be happy’, or ‘I’m a sapiosexual who wants someone who’s beautiful on the inside, must be a girl.’"

At that point, she had rolled her eyes and Arnold chuckled. He was envious, of course but that’s not what Helga wanted. "Well, that’s a bit unlucky."

"I know! God. I accidentally swiped on this one guy who seems to be obsessed with Toy Story. Man, was he a character. ‘Looks like I’ve found a cowgirl for my Woody!’ Next thing I know, he’s sending me a dick pic with a cowboy hat drawn on. I nearly burnt my phone. Legit."

Helga had shuddered and Arnold had laughed himself hard, a little on the giddy side. He was a little relieved, in a way. While he knew that he wasn’t supposed to be entitled to Helga in any way, since it was his decision to be friends, he was okay if Helga took her time to find someone that cared for her genuinely. The longer the better, his petty side would say.
He would try to shake that side of his off. So far, it wasn’t working.

Friday Movie Club was something that happened when Helga was complaining about how considering she was putting herself on the market, it would be amazing if she could at the very least get a Friday night date. She had grumbled about the situation while pouring hot water into her instant pasta pot. Arnold listened, all while wondering how a date with Helga would be like.

“ And it’s not like I want to be busy every Friday, but come on! I’m bored, date me! I’m amazing! I have 4 thousand followers, I like WWE, and I like all the movies, even The Room!”

“ What’s The Room?” he asked without thinking.

Helga has stared at him through the webcam. “ Are you fucking kidding me?” she screeched. “ Are you- oh my god, I knew you deprived yourself of pop culture but CRIPES SAKE CAPTAIN AMERICA-”

“ Helga, just tell me what The Room is about.” he said patiently.

“ I can’t tell you!” she said, scandalised at the very thought. “ No amount of description or vocabulary can ever dream to demonstrate the treasure that is The Room. The film is the father of bad movies, it’s way worse than Plan 9. This movie is so amazing that I will stand in the way of a bullet, I will run through a forest of flames-”

“ Helga.”

“ Okay, okay!”

The next thing Arnold knew, he was being carried to the living room, and Helga arranged the laptop to face the TV screen. It wasn’t the best of quality, but Helga pulled out a DVD, set up the movie, told Arnold that he was in for the best time of his life, and started the movie.

Arnold could safely say that he was not actually having the best time of his life, but he thought the movie was so bad it got fascinating. Also he was a little self-conscious when the two characters started having sex, but then he realised that the movie was so ludicrous that even the sex bits were just weird.

” Is he…having sex with her bellybutton?” he had asked tentatively. Helga only cackled and they continued watching the movie.

”Another sex scene?” he said incredulously 5 minutes later. “ With another guy?”

This movie was just…weird. When the movie finally ended, Helga pulled the laptop to face her. “ Whaddya think on the worst movie ever made?”

“ I…honestly don’t know what I’ve just watched.” he replied honestly.

Helga snorted. “ I’ll say. Sometimes my friends and I watch it in the cinemas, and we bring stuff to throw at the screen. It’s all weird, but it’s fun, just like Rocky Horror.”

“ What’s Rocky Horror?” he asked without thinking again and Helga started screeching in shock at his ignorance. He nearly had his eardrums blown out by the pitch.

So they continued after that experience. They watched horrible show after horrible show. At first it was just movies but after awhile they started on tv shows as well. It was a routine and Arnold
enjoyed it immensely, even if he didn’t enjoy the movies. The draw of Friday Movie Club was always spending time laughing at horrible movies with Helga. She never was as unguarded with him as she was on Friday Movie Night, and he knew that not many would ever see Helga as comfortable as she was, barefoot, tank top, shorts, and hair down her back.

Yeah, this was not helping him in at all.

His phone buzzed and he looked down to see that he had indeed received a text from Helga.

*Dude, hope you settled on that thing happening in your class. You can probably reschedule or something, but you'll probably have to buy me a beer or something just for my services. Today’s show is going to be LIT! I think you’ll love Sex Sent Me To The ER, it's got everything: sex, bad acting, horrible writing. Totally worth it. See ya at your 8!*

Arnold groaned inwardly, while secret glee pooled in his heart.

Nadine was right on another thing. He had issues.

Absolute issues.

Chapter End Notes

I feel better after a little bit of writer's block, so here you go!

*EDIT: I ADDED ART THAT ARRKU DREW OF THE INSTAGRAM SCENE CAUSE OMG.*

If you wish to find more of her work, please go here https://arrku.deviantart.com/ and see her Hey Arnold art. She's also got a fic called Circles, which she's just uploaded, so please support her work! http://archiveofourown.org/works/13513125
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Please note : I AIN’T A LAWYER, I DON’T KNOW NOTHING ABOUT NO LAWS, DON’T @ ME IF YOU FIND THIS UNREALISTIC, SUSPEND YOUR FUCKING BELIEFS JERRY.

CW: Homophobia, verbal abuse, self-esteem issues

Helga’s smirk faded as she sent her text to Arnold, the full weight of the day finally sinking down on her.

Despite her blatant casualness, she was very relieved that she had some time to hide her exhaustion from a class of students and their teacher who was also her friend. The day had been a bit much on her, and she had to make sure she lost a bit of her aggression and irritability before the video call, making a cup of tea and going to the bathroom.

That had helped release a bit of tension in her body, but what had really got her to lose her anger was that video call.

The classroom being in chaos had thrown her off a bit, but it brought her such a hit of nostalgia and seeing Arnold’s confused, resigned face had amused her to the point where she lost some of her previous anger.

Then, somehow, while making dinner, Helga’s brain started casting back to what happened earlier in earlier that day, and her head whirled again.

She had been at her lawyer’s office for most of it, the first time she had been able to do so since she finally got the USB Olga had given her 3 months back. As soon as she had returned to Miltown, she had got a courier to send the USB over to Stanley Horace, her favourite lawyer who had stuck with her since the first book deal.

Fran had introduced the both of them and Helga had admired him for his tenacity, his never say die attitude, and his experience in the army which gave him a scar over his lip, a beady-eyed look of death that stirred fear in the heart of his enemies, and a tattoo of the unit he served with.

At the same time, Helga knew Stanley was a lover of birds, and had two budgies in his office, and he cried when he had lost an egg from them. It was rather sweet.

Sweet was not the feeling Helga had felt during the meeting in the lawyer’s office.

“ What do you mean this isn’t my sister’s will.” She said flatly. “ My sister told me this was her will. I was convinced to see her at a restaurant and made to buy my own brunch food. She told me it was hers and her husband’s…Trevor? Wesley? Francis?”

Stanley sighed, because having known Helga for quite a bit, he was inclined to believe what she said was correct. He was also inclined to believe in the duplicity of man, and judging from his look, Helga knew she wasn’t going to like what he was about to say.
“Pataki, I’mma be straight. This USB?” Here he held up the aforementioned USB drive in question.
“This ain’t just a will. And this ain’t the will of Missus Olga and Whatshisname. This is Robert
Pataki’s will. You know him by any chance? A brother or somewhat?”

The silence in the room could not just be cut with a knife. It could have been sculptured into a more
fashionable shape by a famous swordsman and still be hard enough to kill any noise. Helga was now
looking more angry than annoyed.

“My father.” She muttered. “Threw me out of the house ages ago. We don’t talk.”

Stanley scrutinised his client. Then he nodded, “This explains a lot.”

Helga was silent in reaction to that statement.

Stanley continued, getting up from his chair. “This thing is basically your father’s will, and also the
deed of the property in 25 Mulholland Drive, Hillwood. Heard of it?”

That didn’t need much pondering. “That’s the place we used to stay at before we moved.” She
frowned. “We sold it, didn’t we? Cause that’s how we were able to move to Michigan in the first
place-”

“Apparently no.” Stanley drily replied. “It’s still in your father’s name. The man rented it out to
people. That’s how he’s staying in it now. You didn’t go see him or nothing?”

“Or nothing, Horace.” Helga shot back. Inside her brain was reeling from the information.

“He wants it given to his descendants, so the short of it is, your sister, her kids, and you have a share
in the house. You have a lesser stake in it than anything, but still a stake. Now-“he shuffled his
papers. “According to this house deed, your sister wants to relinquish her stake, as well as her
children’s. She doesn’t want that house.”

Helga snorted. “Course. Miss White WonderBread wouldn’t want the house. She’s got that mansion
and Children of The Corn to raise. Rich kids wouldn’t want to stay in a pokey old house like that-”

“It seems like your father gave up his own stake of the house to her a few months ago. “Stanley
continued. “And now Missus Olga herself wants it given up. “ He gave Helga a look. “To you.”

Silence reigned in the office. Only the sounds of the budgies eating seed could be heard.

“You can’t be fucking serious.” She growled.

“I can, and I am.” He replied.

“I thought you said I had a minor stake in the house!” Helga cried. “Why do I even have a stake in
the first place? I’m the disgrace! The black sheep! The thorn in the footpad of the Pataki Lion or
something-”

And some have the idea that blood exceeds all, if anything. Since the owner of the house is now
Olga Florence Pataki-Johnson, she can and will be able to give you the house in question. Robert
Pataki cannot do anything since he gave his stake to her, making her the majority stakeholder. With
her giving it all up to you, you are now the owner of the property.”

Helga’s head reeled. A house? In the place where she spent her misguided youth, in Hillwood of all
“I don’t want it.” She blurted out. “Have it bulldozed to the ground, burn it, give it to orphans. Fucking anything but this.”

“Pataki, I’m your lawyer, not your real estate agent, I can’t tell you what to do.” Stanley drily. “You get the house, you can decide what you want to do with it. Until then, you just have to figure out whether you want it or no.”

He looked at her with sympathy. “Think about it. The lawyers want an answer in two weeks. And as your friend, all I can suggest is that unwanted gifts are bad, but someone else could use it, and I think you could do wonders with the place.”

She had then spent an hour afterwards at the gym. She had called ahead and asked if it was possible to use their punching bags and they were kind enough to let her use the space despite not reserving it ahead of time. She was lucky, no one else was using the space and the owners liked her well enough to let her in.

Every blow was her anger, unrestrained. She had to control her punches to make sure they didn’t go wild because she didn’t want the punching bag slamming back into her face.

*What on earth what Olga up to?*

She didn’t actually think Olga gave her the house because she genuinely wanted it. Olga didn’t do totally altruistic moves. She did moves that ultimately benefited her. Something was up.

She let one more punch land on the bag before reaching out to grab the bag and steady it, panting. Her knees nearly gave out and she nearly felt herself collapse against the bag.

At the very least, she got that anger out. Most of it.

She had sent a text to Eugene, Phoebe and Patty, updating them on the lawyer situation. She wasn’t sure how they would react. Eugene would be angry, but he would ultimately tell her to keep the house. Phoebe would be objective, asking her to weigh the pros and cons of keeping it and taking out all sentiment when making her final decision. Patty would tell her outright to refuse. She was all about forgiveness, just not for people like the Patakis.

Who else could she ask for advice like this?

She thought back to the people she knew would have a good solution: Nilanjana, her old classmate was out on a scientific study and wouldn’t be contactable. Besides, they had kinda drifted for a bit. Some of her other friends didn’t get the whole dynamic between her and her family. Well, they did, but she didn’t tell them the whole story beyond getting kicked out. They assumed it was because she came out to them. Which was technically correct but still.

A jolt of memory came to her, and she cursed. She had thirty minutes before the video-call, and she grabbed her bag to quickly run back to her apartment and shower.

So here she was.

She had eaten, and she was now lounging around, opening up her Instagram and scrolling through the photos listlessly. She did try to watch a film, but the entire show was grating on her nerves.
She tried to work through her thoughts by writing. That didn’t work.

She even tried eating a pint of ice cream. That gave her brainfreeze and nothing else.

She took a look at her phone just as a text notification came through, and she grabbed it, hoping it was Phoebe coming back with sound advice. She really missed Phoebe and wished she was actually there. The woman was her closest friend, and the fact that they were in different states was not anything new, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt.

It wasn’t Phoebe, but it was Arnold, and somehow some part of her body had unclenched. Sometimes she did kick herself for not trying to be friends with Arnold Shortman earlier. The man was surprisingly fun to talk to. She had thought that it was possible that Arnold would become stodgy, stick in the mud sort of type in the worst case scenario, and that she would feel no regret in never telling him how she felt. Childhood fancy and all.

However, people did exceed expectations, and Arnold was, if anything, not the goody-two-shoes she had expected him to be. The man, apparently, did have a fiery side.

“I once had a fight with a cop, and nearly got arrested.” he had once admitted sheepishly over a video call once. Helga at the time was spinning listlessly on her chair and had fallen off when he mentioned it.

“NO FRIGGING WAY.” she yelled from the floor. “How? Why?” She picked herself off the floor just to eye the screen, looking for his reaction.

The man, through the rather grainy camera quality, was already looking panicked. “No no, you don’t want to hear about this- ”

“YEAH I DO!” she yelled. “I want details! I want full-signed confessions, I want you on your knees saying, ‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned, I have committed the worst sin of all, by not being the saint I was destined to be- ‘ “

She could see him laugh, though still hesitant. “I am not Catholic, for one thing-“

“Come onnn.” she pleaded. “I’ll trade you one story of me getting stage fright, and you tell me this cop story. Please?”

Arnold groaned. “Fine. Gerald and I were babysitting Jamie-O’s 3 kids, and we were at the park, and I swear he and I turned our heads for one second before realising one of the kids was missing. We found the kid in the pond. Luckily, he wasn’t drowning, just hassling the ducks. The swans were not happy.”

“Swans are evil, Arnoldo.” she intoned seriously. “Never get on the bad side of a swan. Wait, since when did we have swans? Also, I thought he was also playing with the ducks? What kind of a baby care unit are you?”

“Helga.”

“Okay, okay, tell me more, Duck man!” she laughed.

“So anyway, the swans were recent additions, and when the kid was hassling the ducks, he made a lot of noise, and the swans were a little aggravated. Apparently, they get kinda territorial- Well, next thing we knew, we were being chased. The swans were really persistent. ”

Helga laughed, the idea of Arnold and Gerald carrying a bunch of kids under their arms and being
chased by the local fowl too much for her to bear. When she finally finished, she managed to muster a smile at Arnold before asking, “Where did the cop come in?”

“I’m getting to that. Basically, we ran past a park ranger, who called the cops because they thought we were hassling the wildlife, and that’s apparently illegal in this town or something. The swans here apparently belong to the Queen-”

“We’re in the US, we’re not colonised anymore, what on earth-”

The point was swan hassling is illegal, and so we were getting charged at the police station, and one of the officers apparently wanted to charge a 5-year-old with harassment. I told him that it was silly, he disagreed, we had words-

Helga whistled. “Damn, Shortman.”

“He wasn’t being fair to the kid.” He explained. Judging by how easily he said that, he had explained this to a lot of people.

“What happened then?” She asked eagerly, hoping he would continue. He obliged.

“Gerald was keeping the kids calm, cause they were in a police station and had been stuck there for a bit, so he couldn’t back me up. Also, he doesn’t like Police stations. The whole police brutality thing had scared him, and he had three of Jamie-O’s kids with him-”

“Oh.” She said in a low voice. She got it. She absolutely got it.

“So I was so close to giving him a punch in the face, I nearly lost it at him. Told him he was a horrible person, yelled some things. He nearly punched me too, but then his Captain came in, and started yelling at him. Long story short, Gerald and I were free to go.”

Helga had slowly nodded as he completed the story, then just as slowly got up and gave him a standing ovation. It felt a little silly doing it when she was alone in her room but hey, she had once used the words,” Flaxen haired angel” to describe a schoolgirl crush, she was dramatic to the bone. “Captain America, you’re a bold man.”

“I’m not Captain America, Helga.” The man chuckled lowly. “We keep going through this.”

“Whatever, Steve Rogers.”

So despite the fact that Arnold Shortman was no longer her childhood love, she was actually enjoying talking to him. The man was still a goody two shoes, a stickler for right and wrong, but now he was willing to stand up for himself. He only used to do it when someone, mostly her, had pushed him far over the edge, but he was different now. In a sense, she got the feeling that back then, he let her get away with more than she actually should have.

Even now he was willing to let Helga do what she wanted, which meant letting her talk at him and using him as a sounding board. She had only done so at the beginning when she realised she had no one else to talk to, and to this day, she had never regretted it.

Maybe telling him what fully happened with the Patakis would be good. She was tired of secrets. She wanted to be open with Arnold.

But this time she was a little hesitant.

Would he understand the Saga of Helga Pataki and her exile from the Pataki family name?
Okay even in her head that sounded a little over the top.

By the time 11pm finally rolled around, Helga was at the stage of antsiness that regularly accompanied the thought of wanting to do something fast so that she could get over it just as quickly.

“Gah, what is wrong with time? She yelled out in frustration. “It’s just one minute, come on, you fucking intangible construct of -”

Right on cue, Arnold’s name and picture flashed on her laptop screen, just as the clock on her phone flipped to exactly 11. Helga near flew over to click on the icon to pick up the video call.

“Arnold!” she nearly yelled at the computer.

The man in question was twitching his lips in a move to smile, but faltered when he saw Helga’s flustered expression. “Helga? You okay?”

Helga took a deep breath. “Okay, it’s been months since we last broached the subject of my family and what happened since I left Hillwood the first time. Right now I need to vent, is that okay?”

To his credit, the blonde man was willing to roll with the punches. Another reason why she liked the man. He nodded, waiting for her to start.

Helga took a deep breath, and she started talking.

She told Arnold about how moving to Michigan was miserable for her and the whole family, but Big Bob had somehow sold the idea that they would be able to start a beeper empire all across America, branching out to cell phones and even laptops and computers. Miriam was still coping despite the fact that she was reliant on her smoothies, and Olga, who had finished college, had moved back with the family to stay with them for a few months to, “show family support”. Helga suspected it was cause Olga had no place to stay while she started looking for jobs, and her father didn’t even bat an eye letting her stay with them.

Miltown was a nice place, and for the supposedly picture-perfect Pataki family, they fit in rather nicely. Big Bob did open up a few chain stores and for a while they were successful. Miriam was quiet and polite to the neighbours, who pointed out how “harmless and sweet” Mrs Pataki was. The two of them regularly went to the country club, where Bob worked on his golf swing, and Miriam explored the menu of signature frozen cocktails the club had to offer. Both husband and wife were strangely never able to spend time together despite going to the same place on the weekends.

Olga found a group of volunteers and she decided that she was going to work in Africa to, “help the troubled children in huts who were barefoot and so uncivilised”.

Helga had rolled her eyes then and told Olga that Africa was a continent, so not every place required help, and not everyone there lived in huts. But then again, Olga Pataki had inherited the Pataki spirit of stubbornness from her father, and from her mother a joyful sense of obliviousness and the need to bury her true emotions in some sort of cause. In this case, it was misguided charity work.

That meant that Helga was alone, most of the time. She wasn’t coping very well in an entirely new city, the only person she talked to regularly was Phoebe, who was beginning to spend less time with her on messenger, because of her after school activities, and her slow, but eventual relationship with Gerald. Without her best friend, Helga was unsure of how to cope.
She managed stop-gap solutions: keeping to herself, reading more, getting into fistfights with other kids. They weren’t always healthy methods but at least she was preoccupied and doing something.

This went on for a few lonely years until she finally found debate, and made friends with Nilanjana, and the people of her debate group. When they finally accepted her and talked to her like she was a normal human being, she was excited and opened up. For once, her sarcastic humour was considered kinda cool. There were people who appreciated her wit and candour. And of course, she had that thing going on with Grace, who taught her so much about herself and what she wanted to do. No longer did she want to mope around the house anymore after school, or ride the bus around the city until even the bus driver was tired of her. She was finally finding her place in Milltown.

Of course, what she didn’t realise was how much her family members were slipping up on their own endeavours. Business went down in the 2000s due to Big Bob losing touch on the magic shark instinct he had for sales. Miriam was quietly losing her battle to alcohol, a battle she honestly didn’t put up too much of a fight against. And Olga was slowly losing her ideal and beliefs in the joy of altruistic charity, finding herself caring less for the orphans and more about another trust fund kid, who she later married.

What Helga’s after-school activities meant that she was no longer around to take care of Miriam when her drinking binges got worse. Sometimes Big Bob berated her, yelled at Helga when she got back from debates, calling her useless for indulging in a sport she was already good at. She could be at home looking after her poor sainted mother, who worked hard to make a home and provide meals on the table. The meals by then were either take out or instant microwavable television dinners. Miriam wasn’t on the ball much anymore.

Bob took his anger out on Helga, the imperfect daughter who was never around to support her family like Olga did. Helga sometimes lashed back but most of the time she was sullen and angry at her parents. Bob never hit her, but his verbal abuse was almost as harsh.

It wasn’t just on her after-school activities. Helga grew up an awkward looking teenager: angry, gawky, and with no idea on how to style herself. She was covered in zits from time to time, and her aching period cramps meant she sometimes looked more bullish than ever. People called her Frida Kahlo, which she knew was meant to be an insult but found it a badge of courage. Grace never commented on her looks, but Helga knew that she sometimes looked at her with pity, like she was helping out a little orphan troll. That was sort of the not very good part of Grace.

Thus, when Big Bob ever commented on Helga, it was based on either her lack of loyalty to the Pataki name or her looks. If Helga was late in coming back, Bob would comment on how she must have been an amazing debater if she spent all that time outside instead of helping her mother. If Helga tied her hair back, Bob would say something about how boys wouldn’t even bother even if she tried, and that a homely girl like her wouldn’t get anyone unless sold for a mule and a donkey. Helga gritted her teeth but didn’t reply.

Then Olga came back, a woman who had finally found her true calling: being the head of a charity led by the family of her boyfriend, who later became her fiance. The golden daughter, who was perfect, beautiful and a kind soul, came back and she had a fiance who was perfect, beautiful and matched Olga in every way, including being obliviously self-centred and misguidedly charitable. They were perfect for each other. Helga found herself ignored again and for once, she was grateful.

But soon the attention would come back to her, in the more harmful of ways. Someone had seen Helga laughing with her debate friends after clubs and meets, and told Bob, who saw it as the girl too busy having fun instead of being at home to look after her increasingly ‘ill’ mother. Someone would mention Helga looking nice at some event and Bob interpreted it in his head as her spending
too much time on her looks. And, the worst of them all: someone mentioned seeing Helga with a girl and them kissing at a party.

So at one point, Bob did yell at Helga about all but the last of the issues. Helga, with the Pataki spirit, did try and fight back. Many of these screaming matches ended in slammed doors and cold wars.

Miriam, to her credit, heard the screaming matches and tried to rouse herself to help one another. Helga considered it a failed effort.

When Helga returned home from debate one day to find her mother lying unconscious on the floor, she tried shaking her awake, then tried lifting her up to the nearby couch.

That was when she realised that Miriam’s chest wasn’t moving. She dropped her mother and screamed for help.

The autopsy would later determine that Miriam Brenner Pataki had passed away an hour before Helga came back, from heart failure.

Bob Pataki finally broke and sobbed at the sterilized, hospital table. When Helga tried to put a comforting hand on her father’s shoulder, he shoved it away.

The funeral, a few days later, was held with a small audience. Miriam wasn’t that well known, and the only adults there were all Big Bob’s friends. Helga was ignored, until a few of her friends showed up, including Nilanjana.

The girl sat awkwardly at the side of the back row and looked up expectantly when Helga came over.

” Hey,” she said. Helga merely nodded, acknowledging her friend’s presence.

“I’m so sorry for your loss.” Nilanjana tried again. Helga looked at her dully.

Both of them didn’t know what to say at this point.

“Thank you for coming.” Helga finally managed. Forcing out niceties on a sober occasion seemed to be her forte now.

She started laughing and crying when she realised the irony of using sober at a funeral like this one. Nilanjana looked concerned and led Helga away. Helga was dimly aware of being led to a bathroom when Nilanjana finally stopped.

” Here,” Nilanjana said, passing over a couple of tissues. “It’s okay to cry, you know.”

Helga knew that. She was just very sure that crying at a funeral like this was wrong for some reason.

Nilanjana looked more concerned and said. “Helga, I like to think that we’re friends. And I want you to know… you can talk to me. Please. Talk to me.”

Helga, in the face of this sort of kindness, was overwhelmed. She felt very alone the past few days. Grace was out of town, she didn’t even call. Her debate friends were away as well, at an out of town meet. Nilanjana was the only one besides Phoebe who had even tried to check up on her.

So she did what any sad, devastated girl who craved physical contact would do. She collapsed into Nilanjana’s arms and sobbed. The other girl was rubbing circular motions into her shoulders,
making soothing noises. For once in the last few days, Helga felt warm. There was someone worried about her and made her feel safe.

Kissing her in her moment of grief seemed to make sense. And, a small part of her was pleased when Nilanjana kissed back.

That was when Olga caught her.

That was when Bob found her after the funeral and blamed her mother’s death on her never being around and her abnormal self kissing girls was the main cause of stress on her poor mother’s heart.

That was when Olga pushed her away and told her it was her fault that she wasn’t putting in as much effort as she was being the perfect daughter.

That was when she finally found the courage to leave.

Arnold was silent when she had ranted all of it out, in a flurry of detail and anger and sometimes garbled language. When she finally stopped, the only thing he could do was stare at her in horror for a few moments.

”Fuck.” was the first thing he said, in a low, strangled voice.

That, for some reason, made her laugh hysterically. She had made Arnold Shortman swear. That was an honour in itself.

”So yeah.” she feebly concluded. “That’s what happened.” Then, “If you start pitying me now, I will tell you, I won’t go easy on you.”

He didn’t react for a few seconds. When he finally opened his mouth, he said, “That explains… a lot.”

“Yeah.”

The both of them did nothing but stare at each other for another few seconds.

Then Arnold spoke. “Honestly, if it were me, I wouldn’t have wanted to come back to see my dad either if he were like that.”

“I know.”

Arnold paused, before he asked, “How do you feel about this situation now?”

“Me?” she asked, searching in her head for the best word to describe her head. The last few times she related this story, she had some choice words.

Guilt.

Regret.

Rage.

Devastation.
“Honestly?” she said, “Now I feel at peace. I saw a shrink at one point, and she taught me the most important lesson: that when people dump and throw shit at me? It’s not on me, it’s on them. I know I didn’t do anything wrong…well, not all the time. I dished it out when they started on me, but in the end, it was them that chose to lash out. I reacted poorly myself, but that was because I wasn’t in full knowledge of what they were doing. I still don’t. And I probably won’t forgive them for that. But in the end, I saw that. It’s taken me years to work on it and honestly, I still do relapse back into doing the same thing like what they did to me, but it’s… easier. I recognise that I fucked up, and I do better if I can.”

The look on Arnold’s face was a look that Helga never expected to see: a combination of teary happiness and woeful mourning.

“Ah fuck, don’t you start crying.” she warned him. “If you start, then I’ll start, and this will never go down well, and Friday Movie Club will be the Crying Game or something.”

“Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me this.” said Arnold. “I can honestly say I understand you a bit more now, and you’ve come this far…it’s humbling.”

Now Helga’s eyes widened in innocence. “Me? Humble the great Arnold Ignatius? I wouldn’t even dream of it!”

That prompted Arnold to laugh, and Helga smiled better now, knowing that the tension was broken a bit more.

“But in all seriousness though,” said Arnold as his laughter died down and he took on a more solemn look. “Why are you telling me this now? Did something happen?”

Helga sighed. Yeah, this was going to require another bout of time.

“So yeah, this started back when I was in Hillwood a few months ago-“
They spent the whole night talking. After Helga told Arnold what had happened in the lawyer’s office, the both of them stayed up to bounce theories off each other about the eternal question: What Should Helga Do?

“Obviously I should say no, right?” The blonde rambled on, pacing back and forth in her room, where she had relocated herself and her laptop. Arnold, who was sitting against his bed frame in his own room, was now leaning back, knees tucked to his chest, head tilted back and thinking hard. Helga would have thought that he was adorable if she weren’t also preoccupied and exhausted with the weight of confession.

“I cannot keep that house.” She continued rambling. “That house is nice but what would I do with a house all the way across the country? My life is here. I live with my Best Friend, my connections are strongest here, I don’t have people bumping into me that I know- that’s not very clear, of course, I have friends I know, I mean people that know me when I was a horrible little shithead-“

“You weren’t annoying, Helga.” Came the patient, very calm tone of Arnold Shortman heard over the shallow tone of the speakers. His voice didn’t resound, like how it would in real life. Sometimes technology didn’t do people justice. “Bossy, yes. Direct, very-”

“Yeah yeah, Football Head, throw more adjectives at me, why don’t ya?” Helga waved her hand at the screen. “I’m trying to make a powerful point here. If this were a TV show, right now I would be making a touching speech about Hogwarts being my home, and people would be sobbing at my feet, and telling me that home is what you make of it-”

“You’re not in Harry Potter, Helga-”

“Not the point, Arnoldo!” She snapped back again. She then felt guilty about snapping at someone who was pretty much her rock at the moment and winced. “Sorry! Sorry! I have super poor impulse control when it comes to yelling, fuck-”


‘Helga, at the moment you have to write all the pros and cons down so you can look at all the facts clearly before you can make a decision, because there are so many factors that go into an important decision like this.’ Helga chirruped in her Phoebe voice, her talent of mimicry still one of her strengths.

The low chuckle she got, as a result, loosened the feeling of misery in her gut. Just a little though.

“And Eugene?” He asked.

‘How dare that Republican bitch! But, you know, property is a great investment, and imagine the room space! I seriously think you should keep the house.’” she replied, adding an inflection of the,” Gosh darn it!” feel that Eugene still had. When mixed in with his persona, it was jarring.

Arnold laughed again and Helga was touched that he still found her funny. “And Patty?” He asked, eagerly.

‘Jezebel, I think Olga has issues, stay the fuck away from it.’” She intoned in Patty’s dry manner.
Arnold nodded, impressed. “Your Patty is seriously good.”

Helga laughed. “I know, I impress myself too,” She bragged, rolling her eyes in the way people do when they know they’re in on a joke that some people wouldn’t get.

Arnold smiled and for a moment, Helga was struck by the warmth of his smile, how nice it was to finally get someone actually impressed with something she said. It was a relief, it was reassuring, and why couldn’t her dates be as easy to humour like Arnold?

Well, on the plus side, she did have one more date to meet this week. Maybe her luck would change.

“So, what about you?” she asked.

“Me what?” Arnold asked, confused.

“What would you say?” Helga pressed on. “Criminy, Arnoldo, I just told you my life story and the question of whether I should keep that townhouse. Whaddya think?” Arnold was silent for a while, and Helga almost wanted to check if the wifi situation in the house was okay, the man was so still that the image on the screen looked like it froze. Then, just as she was about to end the call to try and call the man back, Arnold finally spoke.

“Okay, before we continue…I just want a favour.”

Helga tensed. What on earth did Arnold want? Was this Arnold asking for something big? Was it a date? (Why did her head jump straight to that option?)

She was calm enough though to smoothly ask, “Whaddya need?” Good job, Helga. No sign of anxiety or panic whatsoever. You are a champion, you’re amazing, be glib, be sassy, be cool.

“Well…” Arnold began, a teasing smile. “I still haven’t heard how I would sound like giving advice in this case. What do you think I’ll say?” His eyes, half-lidded, were filled with amusement and anticipation. Helga smirked. She liked him when he was teasing. Again, how was this man single at his age?

She told a deep breath, and opened her eyes really wide, pouring every bit of childhood innocence.

“ ‘Hey, Helga, I sincerely think you should talk to your family and talk it out, so that you can make the best decision for yourself and your family. Ohana means family and family means nobody gets left behind. Talk it out, you might be surprised, and then we can frolick in the fields singing kumbaya altogether.’ ”

There was silence, and Arnold looked at her, eyebrow raised. “Okay, I don’t sound like that.”

“Do so,” she retorted playfully. “You’re all about family values, and traditional love, and kumbaya.”

“I have honestly never told a group of people to hold hands and sing Kumbaya together.” Arnold said, confused. Then his face dropped in growing horror. “Oh wait. I did actually…”

“Wait really?”

Arnold nodded, his shoulders sagging in exasperation. “Yeah, it was really kinda stupid-”

“Holy shit!” Helga yelped in excitement. This sounded juicy. She really wanted to know more. Grabbing the laptop with both hands, she held it up so she could show Arnold how excited she was
about this gossip. “Spill everything, call the ambulance, tell me more about your bad decisions!”

Arnold was now flushed, head in hand, bashful. “Okay, okay. It was one of the first times I was teaching.”

“Uhhuh.” Helga settled down to hear the story, placing the laptop on the bed gently so she could get comfortable.

“I was trying to get my class to get together, but then they weren’t paying attention to me…”

“Oh my god, I’m getting your origin story of being the super teacher, this is exciting, I think I need popcorn for this-"

“Helga-“

“Fine, fine!” she laughed. “I’ll wait for the Marvel adaptation of this story. Do you want to be played by one of the Chrises? I’m not sure if any of them would stand out best for you, but I personally think Chris Pine could work-”

“If you’re going to be this mean, I’m not telling you any more stories about my life- “Arnold was, holy shit, actually pouting. It was either the cutest thing she had ever seen in her life, or the funniest thing.

It could be both.

In this case, it was probably both.

“I’ll be good, I’ll be laughing, but I’ll be good!” she reassured him, a huge grin on her face.

Arnold sighed, but he continued. “Okay, so the kids really hated me and kept throwing spitballs at my face, which is something I’m used to, but not from children smaller than I am. At one point, one of my kids…Freddy… tried to set a snake on me. Luckily Nadine was nearby, otherwise, he would have scared all the children.” He chuckled. “Man, the spitballs actually seem tame by comparison, now that I think about it.”

Helga decided not the mention the times they were children and she had aimed all her spitballs at him.

“Anyway, I was in such despair, I actually did take some advice from an old friend…remember Mr Simmons?”

“Fuck, he’s still around?” Helga blurted out. She didn’t think Mr Simmons would stick around in Hillwood. The last she heard from Phoebe, he had finally come out to his family, and was still together with Peter, his long-time partner.

“Yeah.”Arnold nodded, smilingly. “You’re not going to believe this, but he’s the principal now.”

“Shut your face-“

“I am not joking!” Arnold insisted, holding his hands up in a ,” Totally not joking” manner. “Absolute truth! I swear!”

Helga started laughing again. “But he failed so badly the last time!” she cried.

“Yeah, see, the thing is, he’s got a better grip now, and Principal Wurtz trained him up, he’s better in getting things done, very good administrator, which is honestly what we need right now… anyway, I
asked him for some advice, and he told me the best way to do so was by the thing that connected us most on the most basic level. Which somehow was music. So we brought the kids out to the field, and all of them were getting all cranky and angry about being in the sun, and then I took out my ukulele-“

“ Say no more, Oh em gee!” laughed Helga, holding out a hand to stop him in the most dramatic of fashions. “This is honestly the best day of my life. I don’t need you telling me more, all I need is my imagination-“

“I sometimes regret being friends with you.”Arnold muttered, but she knew he meant it in jest. “But okay, listen. I’m giving you my real view on this.”

Helga nodded, sobering up a little.

“I sincerely think you should keep it.” Arnold replied. “Firstly, from what I remember, it was a pretty decent neighbourhood, right?”

Helga nodded.

“Well, I’m not sure if you know this, but the hipsters are in town.” Arnold said, and it was humour like this that made Helga laugh. The man was mostly sweet, but he knew when and how to deliver a joke. “Prices are pretty high, thanks to gentrification. Our family’s been doing pretty okay so far because hipsters like us for our historic feel, and antique banana wallpaper, in Mr Hyunh’s case. You could keep the place, but convert it into a BnB or something-”

“The other hipsters, like Caleb, would kill me.” Helga countered. “I don’t want to go back to Hillwood just to see a bunch of people with well-maintained beards, bowler hats, and suspenders chase me wielding their artisanal cheese knives. Stealing the trade of their BnB business will make them cry into their cat-poop coffee or something.”

Arnold laughed. “The cat-poop coffee will be fine. Seriously, keep the house, and maybe you can convert it into something nice, like a library or a café, something that your family would never do. You can still get paid as the landlord, and you can make it whatever you want. And you’ll still get paid. You’ve got imagination, I think you can do it.”

Helga sighed. “That’s what my lawyer’s suggesting. But if I take this, wouldn’t that mean I’m indebted to Olga forever? And there are probably stipulations I have to figure out, and maybe I’ll have to give my first born to her-”

“Olga isn’t the devil, Helga.” Arnold said, placatingly. Before Helga could reply that, uh yeah, she probably was, Arnold continued. “There are those…erm…princes of Hell right? She’s probably Beelzebub or something. Not the ultimate boss, but a boss.”

Helga didn’t want to laugh at that line, but she did.

“Anyway, you can keep the house, but then make it your own.”Arnold continued. “You don’t have to stay there, you can make it a library or something. But then, I should say this: You don’t have to be obligated to be friends with Olga, or your father. You’re still your own person.”

He frowned a little. “I’ll be honest. I’m not sure how else you can proceed because right now you have very little information regarding the house. Did you check with your lawyer on the situation?”

The woman looked sheepish,” There was a lot of jargon, so I wasn’t really paying attention…” she muttered.
Arnold nodded. “It might be good to get more information on the state of the house at the moment, maybe even figure out what’s going on, and research. Though not sure if you have enough time for that-”

“Well, that settles it.” Helga leaned back. “It’s Saturday, I can’t do anything until Monday, and by then I won’t have enough time to decide. Unless I travel down to Hillwood and interrogate Olga at her place, I think I’m giving up the house.”

Arnold looked thoughtful, then nodded. “Well, it is your decision, after all. It’s good. Get rid of the bad memories.”

Helga nodded, finally satisfied. “Welp, it’s good then. I’ve made up my mind, I think I can sleep easy tonight.”

Spoiler alert: she didn’t.

“Damn, gurl,” Eugene said, wide-eyed when Helga finally stumbled out of her room the next day. “Did Friday Movie Club drain you or something? What on earth were you and Arnold watching that would lead to you looking like that?”

Helga looked down at herself, wearing an oversized t-shirt and track pants. “It’s cold, Eugene, don’t hassle what I’m wearing when I’m home.” she grumbled.

“I didn’t mean your outfit, Hell-Girl.” Eugene said, waving his hands in front her as she made her way to the small kitchenette, opening a cupboard in search of coffee. “What happened to your face?”

Helga didn’t know what he was talking about. “Genie, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” was what she said out loud.

Eugene made a small noise and took out his phone to snap a picture of Helga, showing it to her. “This!” he said, waving his phone. “Look at you!”

Helga took the phone wearily from Eugene and stared at the screen. “Genie, sweetie. I love you and you’re my best friend, but I fail to see how me wearing puppy ears on a virtual filter makes me look sad.”

Eugene cursed, “No, that wasn’t supposed to happen!” He snatched the phone back and snapped a photo again. “Here, no filter this time.”

Helga looked at the screen again. She could see what Eugene meant. Dark eye circles, hair messily trussed in a top-knot. She was also beginning to feel aware of her really chapped lips and dry skin. That she didn’t need to look at a camera for.

“Well, lucky for the person I sleep with to have this facing them in the morning, huh.” Helga snarked as she tossed the phone back to Eugene, who thankfully caught it. “I need a date soon, and preferably with some top action, mama’s girls need some fresh air-”

“Don’t need to hear it, Helga!” Eugene waved his hands to stop her from talking. “I don’t need to know how long you haven’t had sex-”

“But Eugene, baby!” Helga pouted. “How else can I seduce you with all of this?” she moved her hands all over herself in a parody version of a sexy dance, pulling down her shirt sleeve to show Eugene the scandalous flash of collarbone and shoulder.
“TMI, TMI!” Eugene flailed and Helga cackled. Sometimes Eugene was rather raunchy in his act and was no prude, but give him a feminine body part and he still flushed red like a schoolboy. It was fun to tease him. How the man survived being in theatre with quick changes, and body parts sometimes being flashed around, she didn’t know.

Grabbing her best mug, she rinsed it out and poured in the coffee Eugene had already made, adding sugar and milk the way she liked it. Holding it in her hands, she leaned against the kitchen counter, just smelling the scent of coffee that helped her function through life.

“Just why do you look like that though?” Eugene asked. “You looked like you just ran through a marathon the whole night-“ he stopped short. “Oh my god.”

“What?” she said, not turning to look at him. Oh god, she really loved coffee. Why didn’t anyone make coffee outside like this anymore?

“It’s Friday Movie Club, right?” Eugene slowly said. “And you were watching with Arnold…Oh my god, it’s true!”

“What’s true, Eugene?” she said, still not looking at him. Her eyes were closed, she was drinking in the scent of the coffee, and now she was opening her mouth and lifting the mug to take a glorious sip.

“Friday Movie Club is a marathon wanking session with Arnold!” Eugene yelled. Helga, poor unsuspecting Helga, choked on the coffee she was drinking.

Coughing, sputtering, Helga was going through a variety of motions that happen when you have scalding liquid in the wrong pipe. She, luckily, did not drop her mug, setting it safely down on the counter next to her as she collapsed to her knees in hacking coughs.

“What are you talking about?” screamed Helga. Well, screamed being the technical word. Her throat was so scalded she swore she burnt her vocal chords and so her scream was more of a strangled, high-pitched whine. Dogs nearby barked.

Eugene walked over to where Helga was slowing dying and offered her a cup of water. Helga took the cup gratefully, gulping down the liquid to help soothe her throat. “Thank you.” she muttered and Eugene helped her back on her feet.

Eugene waited until she looked a little steadier before saying, “Sorry, it just made sense for me at the time. Why else would you not date anyone on Friday and stay home? And why else would you be watching sex scenes with Arnold if you both weren’t mutually benefiting from it, if you get my drift-”

Helga started slapping Eugene on the chest and arms, any part of Eugene really.


Eugene laughed, very weakly as he felt the air being literally slapped out of him. “Ow, sorry! It was a mistake- MY FACE-I’m okay, I think- THAT’S NOT AN INVITE TO HIT ME MORE-”

“So that was what we were doing!” Helga finished, with a flourish of her arms.

“Arnold and I stayed up talking about Olga and the house, and I look tired because I was confused about what to do! I think I made a decision, but then I felt uneasy about it and now I look like this
because I’m an unfortunate looking adult who really needs a better skincare routine!”

She announced this in front of Eugene, Phoebe and Patty, the latter two who were communicating via video call on Eugene’s laptop. Eugene was looking guilty, Phoebe was giggling and looking abashed, and Patty merely sighed and said, “Fuck, I lost. Pheebs, you have Paypal or something, I’ll do the transfer in a few.”

“You two thought it was a Friends with Benefits cyber sex thing too?!” Yelled Helga, whirling over to face the laptop. “And bet on it? What the hell?”

“To clarify, Patty thought it might have been a mutually beneficial sexual exchange between friends, while I insisted that you were not interested in that kind of relationship.” Phoebe added from her room, where she was getting undressed from scrubs to change into a comfortable shirt and pants. She had evidently just finished a shift. “I must say I’m happy I won.”

Helga threw her hand dramatically at Patty, who did not look too happy at having lost some money. “Judas!” she accused her.

“Jezebel!” Patty yelled back. “So really? Friday Movie Club is just what it is? Random shows? No porn? No sex?”

“Yes, there is!”Eugene yelled, “ There was a pervert having sex and rubbing himself off against some poor girl’s bellybutton at one point-“

“That’s just a very weird movie, Eugene!” Helga shot back. “Can we get back to the real reason why I called you all? The Olga House thing?”

All three friends settled down and waited for Helga to summarize her answer. Just as she thought: Eugene looked dismayed but supportive, Patty was nodding her approval, and Phoebe merely asked if she had considered all the factors properly before deciding.

“Yeah, I mean, I haven’t told Stanley yet.”Helga said, sitting on the floor and slumping against the coffee table facing her friends. “There’re way too many factors, and I don’t have enough time to get the information I need, short of flying back to Hillwood to interrogate Olga herself. “

“Well, I’m proud of you.”Patty declared. “I think it’s a mature decision, make a clean cut of everything. You did good, Jezzy.”

“I concur.”Phoebe said. “You took the information that you had at the time, and made a decision based on what information you had.”

Only Eugene pouted, “ But Helga, imagine what you’re missing out! Real estate! You could make money!”

Helga rolled her eyes, and laughed weakly,” Genie, not everyone wants an excuse to go visit their beau back in your childhood home.”

“We’re not dating, it wasn’t serious.”Eugene waved. “We talked it out, we’re mature adults, we decided it would be fine to stay as friends.” He said airily. Helga knew he was lying, she’d caught him staring at his phone way too many times for it to be coincidental.

“Anyway, it’s all good, I’ll let Stanley know Monday, it’ll be good.” Helga said. “Now on to business part 2: I’m on a date later. What should I wear?”

As Phoebe and Patty threw a few suggestions at Helga, and Eugene dutifully took out the few
options for Helga to try on, Helga was feeling satisfied. Maybe she was actually feeling good about her decision to not get the house. It was all good and cool. Now she had peace of mind, and she had time to plot out a date with the architect.

All was good!

All was not good.

Helga was bored to tears as she was on her dinner date, with a man she met on Tinder known as Ted. She figured that since he was good looking, and liked designing buildings and was pretty witty, she would do okay on the date.

She was wrong. She was so wrong.

Ted was a good-looking man, yes. Dark hair, brown eyes, a goofy smile. The man was charming in the way nerds were, and Helga sometimes did think that people like him were adorable.

He was also insufferable.

Every few minutes, it was, “do you know that ‘encyclopaedia’ is actually pronounced with more emphasis on the word ‘pae’? It’s just one of the most fascinating things in the world, and you wouldn’t dream how many people get the pronunciation of it wrong. Wrong wrong wrong wrong. My garbage mouth just keeps spouting facts about mansplaining blah blah blah.”

Helga was pretty sure she imagined that last part, but the way she imagined it was accurate on how she wanted to remember it, which was not at all. Since she was currently still on the date, she would have to wait until the end, and hopefully she would never have to see the man again.

“I’m sorry, I’ve been rambling on about me and my passions, please tell me about you and your life.” Said Ted politely, which Helga saw and interpreted as, ‘Tell me about you so I can determine if you are smart enough to date me, you blonde, bimbo headed, shell of a woman.’

Okay, so maybe Helga wasn’t being fair to this man. Maybe she had to give him a chance.

“Well, I’m an author who does children books-“

“Children’s books! “he said in a tone of voice that meant, ’Oh good, garbage, that means I’m smarter than her!’ “I was considering dabbling in children’s books myself, I have a ton of experience… there’s this really good series I read a lot for my nieces and nephews, this book called, ‘Our Gang’- ”

“Oh, yeah, I wrote that!” Helga replied hurriedly, not wanting to give the man any more leeway to make himself seem better than he actually was, which was mostly trash. “I wrote all of that, and-“

“No no, you can’t be the author, the author was a Harold Patrick, from what I remembered.” Ted said, dismissing her completely. Helga’s jaw nearly fell in shock.

Did this man just…mansplain her?

“No.” she said slowly. “No, I’m the author of Our Gang, and I do a few poetry books-“

“Oh poetry! “he said, immediately jumping to that subject. He didn’t even have the gall to actually listen to her finish. “I dabbled in poetry myself, of course, and I’m quite good, if I have to brag-“

“You really didn’t have to.” Helga said, surreptitiously wondering if she could punch this man and
get away with it.

“I am all about the iambic pentameter in my work, just like Shakespeare, and even my professor said that I was closest to him in word style-“

Oh god, why. Why was she doing this.

Somehow, though, this sounded eerily familiar. Her head took her back to the time when she was nine, sitting at the dinner table, listening to Olga ramble on and on about her achievements while he parents nodded and ignored Helga, yet again.

“Oh daddy, you wouldn’t believe what Professor Gregory said about my thesis statement!” Olga was cooing, all while a fawning Miriam and Bob were making appreciative noises and praising her to the high heavens. Helga, grumpy because she really wanted dinner and no one was serving it, nearly growled in response. Back then she had to distract herself wondering about Arnold, hoping that at the very least he was having a wonderful dinner with his loving family and friends.

Now though, her thoughts did drift over to Arnold, her now friend and confidante. What would he say to her dating a smarmy bag like this? How would he react if Helga nudged him under the table to snark about how similar Ted and Olga were? Would they be on a double date? Would she be happier on that date than the one she was currently on? Why was she thinking about Arnold on her date anyway?

She shook herself out of her thoughts, luckily without TEDtalk noticing.

“ - so my sister just doesn’t understand how much I sacrifice myself for her wellbeing. I don’t understand it. I even found her a job with me so she and I can live in the same city! And then she throws it in my face saying that she doesn’t want to move here, she’s happy where she is in New York, and she wants to continue singing!” He huffed. “Singing! Of all the things to do that is unstable and can’t feed you! She could be with me and have a wonderful life if only she would just listen!” TEDtalk leaned back against his chair. “I just want my Sister to be happy-”

Wait a fucking minute.

TEDtalk just made her realise something.

“Just like how this smarmy shithead was all,” concerned” about his Sister by pulling stupid stunts, Olga was doing the same by giving her this house!

Olga was self-centered but generous and she probably got dad to give it up so that they could let the black sheep of the family stay in that old house, where they could keep an eye on her! It was a pity gift! A way to tell her that she would never be worthy enough!

She was furious now. How dare she? How dare Olga do this to her, placing such a large decision on her shoulders in the first place? How dare she imply Helga wasn’t making it out there! For once in her life, she was HAPPY! She was happy and living a great life and she put her years being angry behind her! How dare her Sister bring back those memories, how dare she make her feel small and unwanted even though she had accomplished so much! There was so much roaring in her ears she nearly drowned out Ted’s droning. Nearly.

She stood up abruptly.

“Ted, this isn’t working out.” She said, tossing some money out of her clutch and turning around to
leave. “You’re annoying. Come back and tell me if you ever find the mother of your children, but
you talk far too much.”

TEDtalk was now sputtering, but Helga didn’t pay any attention as she hailed a cab and sped back to
her apartment.

“What do you mean you’re going back to Hillwood?” Phoebe’s concerned voice was heard over the
speaker phone as Helga started tossing clothes speedily into her duffel and her trolley bag.

“Helga, be reasonable, please!” Eugene yelled in the background. “You can’t just up and leave
right now! That’s what Olga wants you to do!”

“Exactly.” Helga said, in an eerily calm, focused voice. “She wants me to do this. She wanted me
to get the house. She even got Bob to give up his share so that I can get it. It’s a sign. Bob only did
stuff for me if he thinks it’s good for my own ‘well-being’, and Olga wants to try and use this as her
telling me that I’ve failed that I can’t get my own house at my age. She’s doing this on purpose.”

Eugene was flustered, tripping over himself trying to get Helga to calm down. But she was calm and
sure. She was sure Phoebe was yelling something. She could hear Eugene saying, “Helga please,
take a break, one deep breath, please” and she had to stop.

She finally looked at Eugene, who was looking at her straight on, panicked and scared, his eyes
uncertain. Phoebe was still shouting down the phone,” Eugene? What’s happening? What’s going
on? Helga? Talk to me!”

She closed her eyes. She took a deep breath. She released the breath after counting to 10. She
opened them again, and felt the little angry monster in her go down.

“Guys, I’m sorry. I’ve been thinking about it today, and during the date, something clicked. I don’t
know what’s going on, and I honestly don’t think just cutting everything out will work. I need
answers. I need them now. And to do it, I have to go back to Hillwood and ask her to her face. I will
save time talking to her, and I can get this out of the way forever.” She frantically looked at Eugene
and the phone where she knew Phoebe was listening. “Please tell me you understand.” she begged.
She knew this was impulsive, and she knew that she didn’t want to lose her friends. They’d
supported her through so much shit with her and she didn’t want this to be the last straw.

Eugene shoved the phone at Helga, and he stalked out of the room. Helga’s heart broke a little.

Phoebe, however, was talking, and Helga could hear her say something. Still a little rattled from
Eugene’s reaction, Helga had to focus hard on what her friend was saying.

“- It’s important that whatever you’re doing, just make sure you be safe, stay with people we trust.
Tell us everything that happens, please, update us everyday so we know you’re safe, stay with my
parents.”

Helga could feel herself tear up a little. Good old Phoebe. Always making sure that Helga was safe
and okay. “It’s okay, please, Pheebs. I know, I know-” she murmured softly.

Eugene walked back archly to the room and before she could say anything, Eugene pushed
something soft at her. She had to blink a few times before she realised that Eugene had given her a
shawl. It was a nice woollen one too. Pink and warm.

“It’s going to be cold there.” he muttered. “Take this, it’ll keep you from the chills there.” He
shoved a bunch of other things at her too. “Extra charger, coffee sachets, neck pillow—”

Helga didn’t know what to say except,” Huh?”

Eugene stopped, and sighed, placing the remaining items on her bag. “Helga. You need these items if you’re on a flight. I’m on the airline website, I’ve found a seat, you have to do the details, I’ll pack for you, just be quick, and get back so we can finish packing, I’m taking you to the airport.” He paused, and hugged her. “You’re right, you need answers. And I’m not sure that it should be like this but if you’re sure, then I’m supporting you.”

Helga hugged back, unsure how else to react. Phoebe was yelling, “Yes, I concur!” in the background. She wished Phoebe was there so that they could hug too.

She released her hold on Eugene and ran to Eugene’s laptop where the airline page was waiting for her travel details.

She had a flight to catch.

At 11pm Saturday night, Arnold’s phone buzzed with a text notification from Helga. Arnold picked it up and he nearly dropped his phone in shock after reading it.

_Im at the airport. I’m coming back. To Hillwood._

Arnold dialled Helga’s phone in disbelief. Helga never replied with spelling mistakes in her text messages. Something was wrong.

“Hey. Football Head.” Helga’s voice, wan and a little flustered, “Giving me the Welcome Committee Party already?”

“Helga, what’s happening? What’s wrong?” he said, sitting up from his bed and wincing from the blood rush to his head.

”I…” he could picture herself hesitating, not sure how to begin. “I want questions answered. I’m coming back to Hillwood to get them answered. I…just thought you should know.”

He too was unsure on how to react. On the one hand, he was excited that she was coming back to Hillwood. On the other, this trip was not made all too willingly. He settled for a more generic, “When’s your flight?”

”Half an hour.” Helga answered. “I’m at the gate. I’m just waiting right now.”

“Anyone picking you up?” he asked, curiously.

”I’m getting an Uber when I reach, I think it’ll be around morning by the time I get there—”

“I’ll pick you up.” he said firmly.

“That won’t be necessary—” she tried to say, but Arnold cut her off, which was a rare thing for him to do. Even he was a little surprised.

”Let me.” he said. “That’s what friends do. You have a place to stay for the time being?”

He could hear her hesitate again. “I haven’t- I should have—”
“Do you want to stay with us for the time being?” he said without thinking. “I can give you my room, I’ll take the couch.”

“I can’t put you out of your own room!” she protested. “I’ll think of something-”

“Just think about it.” he pressed. He could hear her sigh, and a soft, “Fine” from the woman in question.

“Send me your flight details, and I’ll see you in the morning, okay?” he said, and he could hear her uneasily reply,” okay”. They stayed on the phone, keeping each other company until Helga’s gate started calling for passengers to start boarding. Helga said goodbye distractedly to Arnold, and he looked down at the disconnected call, now showing his background menu.

He hoped that whatever was happening, Helga would be okay.

He’d have to find out later when he picked her up later, he decided. He set his alarm for 6, and went to bed, troubled.
Chapter 22

Helga woke up with a start, gradually realising that she was currently not in her room back in Miltown, but crammed in an uncomfortable upright position on a plane.

She silently groaned. She was hoping that when she finally woke up from her sleep, they would have reached their destination, or even close to it. A passing glance at her phone told her quite the opposite, that she was currently still an hour away from her destination. Her mouth felt fuzzy, and she knew it was possible she tasted like death.

*At least I didn't have to kiss TEDtalk.* She thought wryly. That would have made things worse.

She wished she could check on her messages and emails, or at the very least find something to do with her thumbs. She was never one to relax wholeheartedly, preferring to have a task at hand that she could distract her busy mind with. In her haste, she wasn’t even sure if she had brought a book with her to read, or her kindle or even a notebook to jot down her thoughts.

She then glanced at her idle smartphone again, and mentally smacked her forehead. *DOI.*

Within minutes, she managed to open up the notepad on her phone and started typing. At the very least she had something to do, and it helped her feel less anxious about returning to Hillwood just to see Olga and possibly Big Bob.

She had done it once, but would she be able to do it again? Helga idly typed something along the lines of wishing the void would come and sweep her away in their loving arms.

She wondered what she was going to do when she finally reached Hillwood. She really didn’t have a game plan beyond confronting Olga, preferably with a room full of witnesses and denouncing their relationship. She would be able to walk out of the room triumphantly, there would be applause, and she would toss her hair as she gave her sister the last look she would ever deign to bestow upon Olga Frances Pataki-Johnson. Her sister would collapse on her knees and decry about hope lost throughout the years and then maybe finally Helga would win-

But what on earth would she be winning? That made her sink down a little, her thoughts on petty revenge finally dissolving. What was she expecting to happen next after finally confronting her sister? That she would walk out free? That she would never be associated with the Pataki name?

She wished she had someone to talk to. Her seat partners were a whiny teenager kid on her left who had an argument with the flight attendant on being made to sit in economy instead of business, and an older businessman who was balding had tufts of hair in his ears and snoring like a lawnmower. Sandwiched between the both of them, she wondered if she could make a case for having accidentally murdered one of them in her sleep.

She sighed. She really wasn't sure if she was making the right decision coming back to Hillwood like this, just by impulse. She could have just done everything via Stanley, he was very efficient and could get matters resolved quickly. If only she could let the matter of the bloody townhouse go.
She tried to go for her earphones to listen to music, but a passing flight attendant stopped her from doing so, telling her that they were close to landing and all passengers were to remove all headphones and position their seats back up to their original position.

Helga groaned, chalking it up to yet another reason why the world was against her, and braced herself for landing, knowing that the sun would be up, cheerily defiant to her sullen, grumpy mood for the day.

Arnold was late.

Late late late late.

Okay, that was a lie. Technically he was on time, but he wanted to get there early in case Helga’s flight came in. He blamed it all on parking. He had borrowed Gerald's car, knowing for a fact that Gerald was at a shoot and would only return later that morning, so he figured he was able to use it to pick Helga up at the airport.

What he did not expect was parking being the reason it took so long. Airports apparently were very busy places, even in sleepy hipster towns like Hillwood. He had apparently forgotten about the frigging cheese festival bringing tourists from all over the world over to their sleepy town. Which was just weird, there really wasn’t anything special about the cheese in their town. And the Cheese Festival just so happened to be next week, not this week.

He also did stop for a few minutes just to pick up coffee. He figured anyone stuck on a plane would want a pick-me-up after a long flight. If he was as familiar with Helga as he was, she was grumpy in the mornings until she had some sort of caffeine in her system.

He rushed over to the passenger arrival hall just as Helga Pataki rolled out, looking rather grumpy and bundled up in a pink woollen shawl. Her face was pale, which meant that the dark circles under her eyes stood out in stark contrast. She looked unhappy, her mouth set in a straight line, and her hair had been messily pulled back in a ponytail. She looked, in other words, like someone who had been stuck on a plane for a long period of time and didn’t get enough sleep.

She also looked, to Arnold, strangely pretty even in such a circumstance.

Hoping he didn’t look like a goofball staring at her like a slack-jawed yokel (Stinky Petersen for some reason came to mind), he decided to pretend that he didn’t notice her. He wondered how did people in the movies manage to stand casually while holding a tray of coffees casually and looking casual. He wasn’t sure, but he figured the word casual was involved.

Somehow.

“Shortman!” he heard her yell and he looked up, like he didn’t notice that she had come out a few seconds ago. Her unsmile had turned into a sorta smile as she dragged her duffel and trolley bag over to where Arnold was standing.

Both of them stood there, looking awkward and standing awkwardly.

What was the protocol to welcome your friend who was there for something she clearly did not want to do, and you’re secretly happy but also dismayed that she had to return under such a circumstance? Did you hug? Did you do handshakes? High fives? Wiccan chanting under the moonlight?
Did someone teach stuff like that somewhere?

He bet Fuzzy Slippers did. If he was around right now.

He then remembered that he was holding a tray of coffees and thankful that the beverage had once again saved him from a situation in life, he thrust the tray at his friend with a small grin. “Coffee?”

Helga’s face looked unreadable for a few moments and Arnold wondered if he had misstepped in any way. He wasn’t sure how offering coffee would be a misstep but he was pretty sure it would have happened at some point. Then she raised an eyebrow. “Are they both for me or…?”

Oh right.

He raised the tray to look at the inscription. “Erm…I’m plain black, so yours should be…this one.” He pointed said coffee out to her and she took it, warily, and lifted it to her lips. Arnold took the opportunity to snag her trolley bag from her so that she could have an arm free to drink while her other arm was carrying her duffel.

She made satisfied groans as she drank. “How did you know?!” she gasped as she paused to look at him. “They wouldn’t give me any coffee by the time I woke up. I had to make do with cheery thoughts and butterflies in my head which didn’t work, obviously.”

Arnold chuckled. “As if good cheer and insects with wings ever made Helga G Pataki happy.”

She snorted, and took a slower sip of her drink. “Damn, you even remembered my drink order.” she mused.” I mean, I only mentioned it once, and that was ages ago.”

Arnold’s body tensed. Damn, how was she this observant even when grumpy this early in the morning?

He settled for a very casual, “Heh, I’m a great rememberer of drink orders. It’s like a gift.”

Rememberer. Great. Another word to add to the dictionary. His degree would be so proud.

How on earth did a degree even get proud in the first place? Was it sentient at any point?

Before his brain took him to a whole other tangent, Helga looked down at her phone and whistled, “8am. Thanks for picking me up this early, Football Head. Not many would risk their precious Sundays for me.”

Unsure of how to react to that, he said,” No worries, Helga,” all while fumbling with the handle of her trolley bag. He led the way to the carpark with Helga following after, both making small talk, and Arnold helped to load up the car with Helga’s things.

Once both of them were in the car, Arnold started the car, turned to look at Helga in the next seat, and went, “You hungry?”

Helga looked back at him, wide-eyed. “Fuck it Shortman, you a witch or something?” she said bluntly. “How the fuck did you know?”

Arnold, who hadn’t thought he was going to be accused of being a witch this early in the morning (he had been accused of witchcraft a few times in his youth, sometimes by Grandma Gertie), decided to go logically for his answer. “People tend to get hungry during the mornings?” he ventured
hesitantly.

There was a pause, and Helga’s stomach growled in agreement to his guess.

Helga sighed. “Welp, if my body is THIS willing to give me away, then fine, yes. I’m hungry. I’m hungry as fuck. I’m drinking this coffee, and I might maul you if you say we aren’t going to a food joint to get some fries or something-”

“Helga, it’s only 8 am-

“8.15, to be precise.”

“Right. Fries don’t get served until lunchtime.”

“I am not hanging around you if you have this kind of negativity in your life, Football Head.”

Arnold chuckled. “Okay, compromise.” he said as they drive out of the carpark. “We’ll stop by a breakfast place, and if they serve fries, we’ll get fries. Otherwise, it’s probably just going to be eggs and sausages. I know a place that does decent food, and the owners know me. That cool with you?”

Helga seemed agreeable to the idea, so they were off.

Arnold’s breakfast place was a little hole in the wall diner that had never been found by the hipsters, something Arnold had often thanked his lucky stars for.

This meant that prices were always low, the place was always low-key and not many people dined there, and the owners had some time to interact and welcome their customers. Arnold went there with Gerald sometimes to get breakfast in the mornings, and the owners liked them well enough to always remember how they liked their eggs (Arnold preferred his eggs sunny side up and a little runny, while Gerald preferred his scrambled.)

So, when Helga and Arnold pushed the glass door open, the owners looked up smilingly at the sight of one of their favourite customers, but then noticed that he wasn’t here with his usual friend. In fact, he was here, in the morning, with a blonde, female friend. Their eyes alight, they chirpily said good morning to Arnold, and then started fawning over Helga like she was their new daughter in law that their son Arnold had brought in to meet the family.

Arnold was bashful and shy, Helga laughed and let herself in, and the two of them were ushered to a booth at the back, far away from the window and the toilets. This meant they were afforded some privacy, and it seemed like the owners did it intentionally, judging by the wink and nudge they gave Arnold before they left for the kitchen.

Arnold put two and two together and realised that they thought Arnold had brought his date to eat breakfast after an ‘exhausting’ night together. Finding that there was no way he was able to change their perception, he decided to just pretend the notion did not pop into his head, and just enjoy the time talking to Helga. The woman was looking around, fascinated, at the place they were currently in. It seemed as though she didn’t notice what the owners were insinuating about them, which was a damn lucky break for him.

"This place seems nice, and familiar, or not at all.” she remarked. “How long has it been here?”

Arnold smiled, glad to revert to his, ‘Pleasant Faced Tour Guide-y Voice of Guidance” mindset and
not his, ‘My Brain Tells Me Stupid Things That Makes Me Blush’ mindset. “It’s pretty old, the owners have been around for ages, and they run it themselves. We haven’t been near here as kids, and I only found this joint after Gerald and I stumbled on it after a night of drinking. They do great pancakes, and bacon and eggs the way you like them.”

“Well, I’m sold.” Helga declared. “I’ll order what you’re having then, since you know the place so well.”

Arnold smiled, and when one of the owners came over to take their orders, Arnold ordered two Breakfast Platters and two Orange juices. The owner took them down, made a glib comment on them being a lovely couple, and left. Arnold was very determined to not let that woman make him blush as hard as the sliced tomatoes regularly served with the platters.

They sat there for awhile in contemplative silence, both not sure on how to broach the next topic without making the situation awkward. Helga, of course, took the plunge.

“So I’m back.” she started.

“Yes, you are.” Arnold agreed. He had no idea how else to go on at this point. It seemed that neither did Helga.

He decided to go down the most sensible route. “Do you…want to talk about what happened?” he ventured.

Helga rolled her eyes in exasperation, but she talked anyway. The result was a long, convoluted tale of a date gone wrong, and how it led to her conclusion that Olga was hiding something, and how she finally decided to come to Hillwood.

Arnold took it all in, quietly listening to the entire story.

Helga finally finished, and gulped down the orange juice that had arrived when she was talking, downing the entire glass in one shot. She nearly slammed down the glass after doing so, and the owners obligingly came over to refill her juice.

“Wow,” was the first thing Arnold could say.

“Yeah,” Helga replied. She raised the glass to her mouth again, this time sipping it slowly.

"Ted really doesn't seem like a very nice guy," he said slowly. Sue him, it was the first thing he was thinking about.

"I know!" she replied, raising her hands in a gesture Arnold interpreted as, "Oh my god, yes, guys are fucking weird, aren't they?"

“So…you're back to talk to Olga?” asked Arnold, raising his own glass to take a gulp of his own juice.

Helga nodded. “I can’t stop thinking about it, this will annoy me to the depths of the earth. It’s been only TWO days and already I’m in such a state. I need to get this settled. I want to sleep well again. I want to walk through my house again without having to worry about another frigging place halfway across the country.”

“Any idea on how to get to her?” he asked.
Helga looked a little deflated on that. “No,” she admitted. “I figured Twitter DMs… but I don’t know, she would know I’m coming, and I want to shock her into giving me the truth if it makes sense. If I told her I was here, she wouldn’t give me the proper info and…” she trailed off, now at a loss for words. “Crap. I really didn’t think this through,” she muttered, lurching herself forward on the table, face down, hands splayed across the table in a show of despair.

Arnold decided to reach over and pat her on the shoulder in a show of sympathy. “It’s okay… look. Plans are around… maybe 80% planning, 20% winging it. We just have a bit more winging it than usual, but it’s definitely manageable. We’ll just have to look at it, bit by bit okay?” he said kindly. Helga made a noise that was probably an agreement. He wasn’t that sure.

The owner who had taken their orders had returned with two plates laden with food. “Your girl okay?” she asked sympathetically. “You’re not making her sad, are you?” Her tone had gone from concern to fierce protectiveness, and Arnold winced and marvelled that somehow Helga had managed to gain some sort of protection detail from the fierce proprietor of the store in a matter of moments.

“No, Mrs Banks, I promise I’m not.” Arnold replied, deciding to ignore the fact that she had referred to Helga as his, ‘girl’.

Helga turned her face to look at Mrs Banks and smiled, “Not to worry, m’am. Football Head here is treating me like a queen.” She raised her head to smile at Arnold. ”He treats me real nice here.” The man whose heart was beating right out his chest managed to slap himself mentally into shape so he wasn’t blushing red.

He did, however, allow himself to grin a little.

The owner looked reassured and placed the plates on the table. “Dig in, kiddies,” she said. “I don’t know you, girlie, but if this guy tries anything-” she glared at Arnold, who was now wondering how he had gone from favourite customer to possible shitlist.

Helga smiled and sat up. “You’ll be the first one I call,” she replied. The owner nodded and went back to the kitchen.

”I like her.” Helga smirked. “She’s feisty.”

As both of them dug into their food, Helga felt herself relax a little since getting out of the airport. She had felt out of her element for awhile but thanks to Arnold and the good breakfast food, she was shaking that horrible feeling of dread and anxiety off.

And it also helped that Arnold Shortman was a really good listener. The man thought that throwing out anything she knew about Olga would be a good way to pick up something that she may have missed out that they could exploit. She started throwing out every single fact of Olga that she still remembered. However, at some point, she may have started throwing out a few things that might have been a bit irrelevant to the situation at hand.

“- and that one time, she went to Alaska and thought her life’s quest was to become a dog sled driver, but she then kept falling off the sled and chasing after the dogs, and that kinda got very tiring.”
“Maybe something closer to Hillwood, Helga?” Arnold cut in patiently.

She let her head thunk against the wall, in a show of despair. “Fuck everything, Arnoldo! I don’t know what to think anymore! I know nothing about Mrs Olga Frances Pataki-Johnson—”

“Wait, you know her married name?” Arnold asked.

“Well, doi, Shortman!” she scoffed. “White guy, last name Johnson. Rich dude, trust fund kid, hair of spun gold, face like a baby’s bottom, shin bones of a delicate Victorian maiden…He was like a young Billy Skaasgard. But I’ve forgotten his first name. It was a really bland white guy’s name. Doug? Steve? Chris? Ah fuck it!”

She lifted her head off the wall and continued, “Sides, Johnson is a very common last name. I googled a list of Johnsons in Hillwood and it turns out there are TONS of Johnsons. There’s even an advertising exec Johnson that married a Doctor Johnson, what makes you think I know which Johnson it is?”

Arnold paused, and spoke again. “Well, you said it yourself. This Johnson guy was rich right? And judging by your earlier fact throwing, he was considering running for mayor, but he hadn’t announced his campaign?”

Helga nodded. “Last I heard.”

“And you mentioned he was a trust fund kid, right?” Arnold said, taking out his phone.

“Well, if you want only the rich Johnsons in Hillwood,” he continued, typing as he spoke, “You’re left with only one family, the Hillwood Vanderbilt-Johnsons.” he said, turning his phone screen to face her.

He was showing her a picture of a very big, blonde family wearing matching tennis whites and carrying rackets. They were all big smiles, white shiny teeth, and judging by some of the watches they were wearing, very rich. Helga squinted at the tiny faces, stopping at one particular male face. He looked exactly like the guy Helga had seen when Olga brought the man home for dinner at their place, showing him off to Miriam and Bob.

“That’s him, I think.” she said slowly. “Where did you find this? Google?”

Arnold shook his head. “No, Facebook. The Johnsons are famous here, but also a little low-key on the famous rich people list, so not many people know them very well. It’s sort of the reason why they go by Johnson instead of Vanderbilt-Johnson, they figured it was a way of getting less attention.”

“Then how do you know them?” Helga asked.

Arnold grinned. “Well, when you need information on the rich and famous in Hillwood, you don’t have to go very far to find someone who knows all the gossip and the information, especially if she’s running her very own company in Hillwood and dating one of the members of the Vanderbilt-Johnson family—”

Helga slammed her hand on the table and raised her other hand at Arnold, finger pointed at him. “RHONDA!” she yelled.

Arnold grinned a little. “We just need to talk to Rhonda, get her to give all the information we need, and then we will know how to proceed from there.”
Helga’s face, so recently triumphant, then immediately sagged in disappointment. “But then what?” she said. “What do I do? Confront them? Make a scene? Throw all the dishes around?” Helga’s shoulders slumped. “Argh, fucking hell, I’m just so frigging tired, I can’t do this, Shortman. I used to be full of spitfire and righteous rage, but this is my family, I don’t know if what I’m doing is right, I don’t even know if I’m even looking at the right Johnson! All blonde guys look very similar!”

“I should be offended, but I’m not.” The very blonde Arnold remarked.

“Psh, you know what I mean.” Helga waved a hand. “You’re distinctive, you’re unique. You’re a very special person in your very own way, like a limited edition Ken Doll with a random football shaped head, and you happen to be very easy to spot if you were put in a line full of random blonde guys…”

“I get it Helga.”

“No no, in all seriousness. Manhunt contest, if all the males were blonde and wore really preppy sweaters and nice khakis—”

“Thank you Helga—”

“I’m trying to be nice here!” Helga was waving both hands around now. “You’re special. You’re honestly the goofiest guy I’ve ever met. My friends all say you’re hot as hell, and one honestly wants you to spank him—”

“...What.”

“Ignore Damien, he doesn’t know any better. What I’m trying to say is, you’re one of the best. You’re a total package. People should be throwing themselves at you by now. And anyone who doesn’t immediately think you’re the best and unique is super weird.”

Arnold leaned back against the booth seat, head down and a little flushed. “T-thanks.” he muttered, fiddling with the knife on his clean plate.

“No...No problem.” Helga replied, weakly, registering his rather bashful countenance. Crap, did she say something horrible?

Before she could continue, Arnold’s phone started buzzing, and Helga was very relieved to not have to clear the tension by apologizing to him as Arnold picked up the phone to check on his messages, murmuring an apology at Helga as he did so.

She must have accidentally brought up a sore point for Arnold for being single at his age. She felt kinda bad. Maybe she should convince him to go on a date at some point?

Arnold made a noise of disbelief as he looked up at Helga. “Okay, don’t freak out on me…”

“What?”

“That was Gerald.” he said, slowly. His eyes were lighting up with enthusiasm and excitement. “He’s texting me that he’s finished his shoot and he’s bringing the entire crew back to our place for refreshments, and that a certain boss of his is currently with him…”

Helga took a few moments to remember where Gerald worked at and who his boss was. “Rhonda?!”
Arnold nodded. “Yeap!”

“Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd, first of her name, in the House of Wellington-Lloyd, is coming to your apartment.”

”Uh-huh.”

"The Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd that we mentioned a few minutes ago might have information on the Johnsons, in particular, Olga’s husband is coming to your apartment just as I am going over there to possibly stay for the time being.”

”Yes.”

A pause.

”Arnold, seriously. Tell me the truth. I won’t rat you out to the Spanish Inquisition. Are you a witch?”

“I wish people would stop asking me that.”

Chapter End Notes

It's shorter than usual but hey, good stopping point.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

HONEY THIS TOOK AND FELT LIKE IT WAS AGES.

The fact of the matter was, Arnold thought as he drove Helga back to his apartment, they really didn’t have a game plan with regards to Helga’s situation. All they had was a hunch, and hunches were not always good or indicative of the truth, they were just what they were. But Rhonda was a start.

Rhonda being the key to talking to someone difficult was a bit ironic, in Arnold’s opinion. He had nothing against one of his oldest friends, but he had to admit that Rhonda was one of the most challenging people he had ever met, and was more likely to cause more problems than to actually solve them.

It was a rather horrible thing to say but Arnold had basis to feel that way. In high school, Rhonda, in an attempt to try and become Homecoming Queen, decided to be well-rounded in the eyes of the masses. This meant, for some reason, getting into charity work and dating someone that suited her new image: someone sensitive, artistic, and all-round sweet and charitable guy. Arnold Shortman was her third option.

(The first one was unavailable during homecoming and the second option refused on principle because he was gay. Arnold was, to be fairly honest, pretty touched that Rhonda had considered other people before turning to him to help, but that didn’t help in the end.)

Arnold had agreed to that very tear-filled request, though now that he was thinking about it, he still didn’t remember why. All he remembered was that he had relented after a few hours of Rhonda persuading him (read:sobbing and begging and tons of monetary bribes), and it also was the precursor to a whole month of grief. The funny part was that he had only dated Rhonda for a week before the actual event.

It was still a very traumatic month.

It was all Curly’s fault. Or, as he had insisted on being called, “ Gammethorpe the Grey.”

The point was, Rhonda was a nice woman in her own way, but she was not necessarily the definition of easy, nor was she often the solution to many problems. Nadine Jones was her best friend and even she would often roll her eyes when talking about the recent exploits of Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd in the staffroom after the weekend.

He wondered how Helga was handling the absurd idea that for once they actually had to rely on Rhonda as an actual source of information. “ Hey Helga, whaddyaya think –“

He turned to glance at her just as he said that and was met with a small, light snore from the slightly crumpled form of Helga Pataki in the passenger seat next to him.

The blonde woman was fast asleep.
The man looked back quickly, keeping his gaze on the road and feeling self-conscious. He had seen Helga in many forms, angry, happy, sad, and even slightly drunk, but this was the first time he had actually seen Helga exhausted and asleep, and for some reason it seemed like he had intruded on an intimate, vulnerable moment. In most of the times they had spent together, Helga was always full of life, always alert, whether quipping a smart comment at something Arnold said or reacting without saying a word.

Here, seeing her pale face almost obscured because she was so curled up against the window, so still and so silent, the man felt the want to protect his poor friend from all the troubles of the world (this was the influence of Mr Simmons in him, he swore.) Even in sleep she looked a little stressed, the eyebrows making her face seem more troubled. He sighed quietly so that Helga wouldn’t hear him.

In all honesty he was worried for Helga. During breakfast she had kept up appearances, but stuff like that took a toll on people, no matter how calm they seemed about it.

He wondered how long she was planning to stay in Hillwood. He was a little ashamed when his brain helpfully supplied, “Hopefully forever.”

That answer felt a little selfish. Helga herself mentioned that she had a whole life in Miltown, like Eugene, an apartment, friends like that creepy guy who wanted to be spanked (‘Damien!’ His brain quipped again. Shut up brain). She had carved out a whole life for herself right there with a really good support network, something she never really had here in Hillwood. He couldn’t ask her to give that up.

Besides, a nasty voice popped up in his head, what makes you think she would give it up for you of all people? You’re just a friend. She’s not interested in someone boring and bland. She deserved the world.

Arnold’s thoughts were thankfully put on pause when they pulled up at the apartment building that Arnold and Gerald stayed at, parking nicely behind a white van.

Out loud, he said, “Helga, we’re here.”

No response. He turned back to look at the passenger side and saw Helga still sleeping against the door. He sighed, and cautiously reached a hand over to jog her shoulder. “Helga, hey. We’re here.”

Helga stirred, making a rather grumpy noise as she stretched, wiping the sleep from her eyes. She turned to look over at Arnold, unfocused blue eyes blinking to look at him.

Arnold cleared his throat again. “W-we’re here.” he stammered. Damn, that was uncharacteristic of him. Was he okay?

Helga turned over to look out the car window, looking like she was taking time to recollect her bearings and remember where she was. “Hillwood.” she muttered. “Right.”

She unlocked the door and rolled out and Arnold, a bit confused and even more worried, unlocked his own car door to unload the car.

Helga, who had somehow fallen asleep in the car, had taken a few minutes to remember that, once again, she was back in Hillwood, and not in her apartment with Eugene. At this time of the morning, the man would probably still be sleeping.
She resolved to make sure she text him, and Phoebe, to let them know that she was safe in Hillwood, and where she would be staying for the next few days. The two of them had done so much for her, the least she could do was take care of herself in a place without them.

And it helped that she had people she could rely on in Hillwood.

Well, at least two.

Taking some time to shake the stiffness of her limbs out, she grabbed her trolley bag from Arnold, who had unloaded it out of the boot of the car. The two of them had a short tugging match over who would carry Helga’s duffel, with Arnold having the upper hand due to getting it first but Helga holding on due to sheer tenacity and stubbornness.

Eventually, Helga let go of the duffel ruefully to the grinning blonde man but fuck him, she was carrying her own trolley bag. It was a matter of pride after all.

“Why, thank you for letting me win.” Arnold teased. Helga, despite herself, snorted.

“You wish.” she shot back. “When you come visit me in Michigan, I’ll carry your bags, Shortman. I’m letting you carry this because I’m an old, retiring woman, and my bones need a break.”

“You’re the same age as me, Helga.” Arnold replied patiently.

“I have aches that scream differently, Football Head.”

She let the man lead the way up the apartment building stairs, carrying her duffel bag slung over his shoulder, and she, with some effort, lugged her trolley bag up the stairs. It was a struggle but dammit, she was not letting fucking Captain America win.

Even if he was handling her rather heavy duffel bag with apparent ease. Fuck this man and his apparent strength. What happened to being short like his name? When did the fucker gain a good inch or two over her? Was she shrinking?

The height did give him some sort of dignity though, she had to admit. And he had filled out nicely, so he didn’t look like a lanky scarecrow-like Stinky was. It must have been due to running after the kids in his class like he did.

She may have let her gaze fall down to his butt. Out of a writer’s curiosity, of course.

Well, the man filled out nicely. Damien would be pleased.

She forced herself to stop smirking as Arnold finally stopped climbing the stairs, turning left to walk straight towards a door that had the number 33 on it. He paused in front of it, rummaging through his pockets for his keys. Helga could hear voices behind the door and braced herself, knowing that Rhonda was probably behind the door and it was her only opportunity to get to know as much as possible about the possible lead she might have.

Arnold looked back at her, keys in his hand. “You ready?” he said softly.

Helga mustered a weak smile. “Ready as ready could be,” she lied. Arnold cocked his head at her, studying her face.

“You can just go in and not talk to Rhonda about it, if you want.” he offered. “It’s just a question, I’m sure we have other avenues-”
“No no.” she quickly said, shaking her head. She was not a wuss. She’d faced bigger demons before, like misogynistic heads of publishing, bigoted protestors at rallies, and The Flaming Alcoholic Tower of Sauron. She could face anything.

Arnold opened the door and pushed it open just as the laughing chorus of voices paused to see who was coming in, cheering loudly when they saw it was Arnold. The chorus of voices then lowered a little in volume when Helga stepped in, and she only had time to take in the number of faces in the room before a screech came from the middle of the kitchen, and Rhonda separated herself from the group to point a finger at the interlopers.

“Helga G Pataki!” was the first thing she yelled. “What- and how?”

Arnold and Helga stopped in shock. Mostly because of the screaming. Helga was impressed, Rhonda’s screaming had been pretty good pitch and volume wise. If Rhonda wasn’t good at what she was doing at work, she would have made a passable opera singer.

Gerald came running in from inside the house, his face full of annoyance. “Rhonda, I keep telling you, you have to stop screaming in this house, people keep thinking you’re my girlfriend and they keep telling me to lower the volume and everything gets misunderstood- Helga?” He said, belatedly turning to where Rhonda was looking at and realising there was a blonde person he really wasn’t expecting.

Helga gave a little embarrassed wave. “Um… surprise?” she said, uncertain of how they were reacting.

Rhonda was now brisk walking to the door, and enveloping Helga in a fierce, very tight bear hug. Gerald had, in the meantime, grabbed his best friend and were heatedly discussing something over in the living room area. The other crew members were pretending they were not interested in either one of the goings-on. Helga was pretty sure she heard someone actually mutter, ‘Peas and carrots, rhubarb rhubarb.’ to the other.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” Rhonda demanded when she let Helga go. “Do you know how embarrassing it is for me to greet you while I’m wearing sweatpants and my sloppy workout clothes?” she said as she gestured with her hand to showcase an immaculate Ivy Park tank top and a beautiful pair of red yoga tights.

Helga looked at Rhonda, then back down at what she was wearing: an oversized hoodie, black tights under black shorts, Doc Martens and Eugene’s pink shawl thrown messily over one shoulder. She looked back at Rhonda again, who had her straight black hair styled into a messily on purpose fishtail braid, and her face looked flawless. She thought wryly about her messy ponytail, done because she really wasn’t too bothered about styling her hair in the morning and considered for a second time in two days to invest in a nighttime skincare routine.

“Are you on some sort of diet that’s messing with your sight, Wellington-Lloyd?” Helga drily intoned. “You look amazing.”

“Oh, you’re too kind, Helga!” Rhonda waved a hand airily in the flashy way rich people did, and Helga caught a glimpse of a beautifully manicured hand with what seemed like gel nails. “I look like a mess, I swear.”

Helga raised an eyebrow at that statement, but before she could say something else, Arnold, who had seemingly finished his heated discussion with Gerald, came back, smiling warmly at Helga and Rhonda.
“So, Rhonda, great chat, but Helga’s going to need to unpack and stuff- but don’t go away! We’ll have a good long chat in a few minutes, we’ll even get lunch!” Arnold yelled, gesturing at Helga with a tilt of his head, grabbing her duffel and motioning her to follow him. She did, dragging her trolley bag along, noticing that Gerald was now going towards Rhonda with a very determined look in his eye.

Helga followed Arnold down the small hallway that led to two rooms facing each other, and turned left into a small room that let in a lot of natural light. Judging by the light blue decor, the open closet full of sweaters and plaid shirts, and the worn, but well-kept sound system, this was Arnold’s room.

“Gerald okay?” was the first thing she asked when Arnold turned around to face her, setting her duffel bag down at the foot of his bed. She was worried that she was sprung on Gerald without warning and she really didn’t want to intrude on his space. “I can totally leave, Caleb can probably help me find a hipster family to stay with-”

“No no!” Arnold held his hands up in a placating manner “Gerald’s fine with you here. He was just asking me for an update on what was going on. He’s totally cool with you here-”

”Also I keep telling you I’m not going to take your room here, you fucking loser.” Helga continued, wincing inwardly when she heard her tone. She sounded way harsher than she had meant to. She started pacing left and right, flailing her arms around as she did. “I can’t intrude on your personal space, it’s yours-”

Arnold waited patiently, and sat down on his desk chair to look up at the panicking Helga as she ranted on about how it was ridiculous it was to give up a room just because she was a female, she could take a couch, she had slept in worse conditions before, she slept on the pavements during protests, for fuck’s sake, she did not need to be mollycoddled.

Helga stopped her pacing and arm flailing and turned to look at the man she was angry at, who was at the moment, uncharacteristically looking up at her smilingly. That threw her off. Just a little. “WHAT?!” She burst out, after a few seconds of waiting.

Arnold laughed, short huffs of air and sound coming out from his chest. “Relax, Helga. I swear. We’re here because you can’t just store your luggage in the living room, you can use mine, and half my closet, I seriously don’t use that much space.” He gestured at the open closet, which Helga realised was half empty. “Put your luggage in there, hang clothes, I have spare hangers, really, just use it.”

He walked out of the room, a half-smile playing on his lips. “Just use the room, I’ll give you some time to be decent. You’re sleeping on the couch like you insisted, I’ll just go and find blankets or something so you’ll keep warm.”

Arnold waited patiently, and sat down on his desk chair to look up at the panicking Helga as she ranted on about how it was ridiculous it was to give up a room just because she was a female, she could take a couch, she had slept in worse conditions before, she slept on the pavements during protests, for fuck’s sake, she did not need to be mollycoddled.

Helga was left alone in the small, but airy room, and so she took some time to look around. This was one of the very few times she was alone in Arnold’s room with permission, and it was way different from the bedroom that looked up to the sky that Arnold had in his youth. It was not as high-tech, for one thing. No remote-controlled couch, no ceiling window, and he didn’t have a TV in his room.

It had, however, windows that filled the room with light. The wallpaper was a light blue pinstripe that ran down to well-worn, but polished wooden floors. The bed hadn’t been made: Arnold must have been in a rush to get out of bed to pick her up at the airport to make it. Helga spied a tiny, worn,
light-blue cap perched on the top of the desktop lamp, and snorted. Arnold was still a sentimental sap even at his age.

She opened up her trolley bag and duffel and laid them all out on the floor. In her haste, she had forgotten if she had packed stuff like her laptop and her kindle, and it seemed like Eugene had helpfully put them in her duffel. She had forgotten that she had them taken out during the airport x-ray segment, so she laughed ruefully at her forgetfulness. She laid them out on the bed and started hanging clothes. She wasn’t sure how long she was going to be down here in Hillwood, but she sure wasn’t going to act like she was living out of her suitcase like a hobo.

Arnold closed the door of the closet and walked towards the living room area, where the tiny kitchenette seemed emptier with only Rhonda and Gerald left. The rest of the crew must have gone home.

“So Helga’s gonna be staying with us for a bit.” he began. “And she’s taking the couch—”

Rhonda made a short sharp sound of protest, and Gerald looked at his best friend like he was crazy.

“Dude, you crazy?” Gerald asked him. “You don’t make a lady stay on the couch! You give her your room, and you sleep on the couch or you share the room with your best friend or something! That way no woman has to sleep on the couch!”

“Arnold Shortman you despicable man!” Rhonda shrieked. “Are you letting Helga G Pataki sleep on the couch! What kind of gentleman lets any woman sleep on the couch during the cold Hillwood winters! At the very least you share the room! You…you absolute brute!” She slapped him in the chest at the last part.

Arnold felt, for some strange reason, like he was talking to his parents, who were telling him he was an idiot. Not his actual parents, of course, they were more sensible than these two.

“Guys, she insisted on sleeping on the couch!” he protested!

Another smack landed on him. “No excuses!” Rhonda yelled. “I had to hear about you having feelings for that woman from Nadine! Are you telling me I had to hear second-hand gossip on such amazing news, and then you make her sleep on the couch?”

Before Arnold could panic about how she knew about that little secret of his, Rhonda held a dramatic hand at him, the other one against her forehead like a fainting damsel in distress. “I cannot believe that man I used to date has become a traitor! Gerald! Hold me! This boy is trying to give me a heart attack!”

Gerald pretended to sob, “My baby boy!” He yelled, holding on to Rhonda. “Hold me, woman! Our son is being mean!”

Arnold, resigned, decided that if anything, his parents were way more sensible than these people. These two were currently acting as dramatic as stars from a telenovela. “Guys, she insisted, and the couch pulls out! She’s using my closet to store her clothes and luggage—”

“Well, at least you were kind to her in that aspect.” Rhonda sniffed.

”Also, Rhonda, we fake- dated for a week! We never dated!” Arnold said. He darted his eyes to make sure Helga wasn’t coming anywhere near, and lowered his voice, “How did you know about
…that?

“Nadine, duh!” Rhonda waved a hand. “It’s old news, I found out back in 2017, for god’s sake. It’s 2018 now. Love who you want and all that. What I want to know is how you are making it up to her, since you’ve obviously declared your love to her, which is why she is even back in Hillwood in the first place-”

“What.”

Gerald nodded. “Well, it makes sense, man. All you told me just now was that you called her in the middle of the night, she needed a place to stay, and you offered her this place, and she had business here. I assumed it was cause of you-”

Arnold flailed his hands. “Guys, guys! It’s not like that! We’ll explain during lunch or when she’s ready, but suffice to say, she needs to talk to you, Rhonda.”

“Really?” Rhonda squealed. “Oh, the people finally need me!”

“Something like that,” Arnold muttered, hoping that Helga was finishing soon so that he wouldn’t have to handle these two alone.

When Helga finally walked out of the room 20 minutes later, clutching her phone charger and her phone, she was greeted by three of the people she had known the longest lounging casually around the kitchenette. Arnold and Rhonda were drinking hot tea, and Gerald was eating cereal from a bowl. Rhonda perked up when she saw Helga.

“Finally!” Rhonda squealed. “You were taking ages, and I was getting worried!”

Helga, still unsure on the proper protocol to handle Rhonda, decided to just let Rhonda rattle on. Rhonda hugged her, and Helga was reminded of how annoyed she got at people who were more put together than she was and made her feel insecure.

“It’s good to talk to someone from all the way back!” Rhonda said, leading her to the couch at the nearby living room area. “You wouldn’t believe the people who don’t understand how it’s importance to rough it out, I know so many people who don’t understand their white privilege and classist elitist views, it’s actually a breath of fresh air working at TalkBuzz and hanging out with you guys!” She grabbed Helga’s hands, clutching them as though they were dear friends.

Helga raised an eyebrow, but she decided to just smile and nod. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Arnold and Gerald pretending not to be curious about what was happening in the living room area. She knew this because Gerald was rolling his eyes in reaction to what Rhonda was saying, and Arnold was shaking his head in second-hand embarrassment.

“I have to tell you, I like it when it’s just me and people like you guys!” Rhonda continued. “Talkbuzz has opened up my eyes so much to so much injustice, and it’s just good to talk about things nobody else would want to talk about. Raul is somewhat interested, but he’s a Vanderbilt-Johnson, he doesn’t know what to do-”

Helga saw it as her cue and went for it. “Rhonda. I’m here because…well. I need your help. Sort of .”

Rhonda gasped, “I knew it!” she breathed.

Helga raised her eyebrow again. “You…did?”
“Well… Arnold mentioned you wanted to speak to me.” Rhonda replied as she took out her phone. Back in the kitchenette, Arnold had choked on his tea and was now attempting to cough silently and quietly so as not to interrupt the scene in front of him. Gerald was silently laughing at his best friend.

Luckily, Rhonda wasn’t paying attention. Or if she was she was very good at ignoring background shenanigans. “And well, I am well-connected, and I can help you, Helga G Pataki. Whatever you ask, I can definitely supply.”

Helga went for it. “What can you tell me about the Vanderbilt-Johnsons? I… I know my sister is married to a Johnson, and I think it might be the same Johnson as the Vanderbilt-Johnsons, and I need to talk to Olga. I have questions.”

Rhonda looked at Helga for a few seconds, tilting her head as she examined her. “Olga doesn’t know you’re here, does she?”

Helga looked at her and Rhonda answered her unspoken question. “If you wanted to ask her about stuff like who she’s really married to, you would be asking her straight away, not going through me. Only Arnold knew you were coming down here, not Gerald, which makes me think this trip wasn’t planned, otherwise, Arnold would have told Gerald. You need me because I’m part of the rich and exclusive elite in Hillwood, and I know every bit of gossip and fact about every single family member. You would also have heard that I’m dating someone in the Vanderbilt-Johnson family, so you know I would have somewhat intimate information about the family, especially if the person in question is a Vanderbilt-Johnson. You clearly haven’t talked to Olga in years, judging by some of the interviews I’ve read about you. So. You need me to supply you with info about Olga and her family. You don’t want to be blindsided by anything.”

Helga waited until Rhonda had finished and looked at her expectantly before she could react. Damn, Rhonda was way smarter than she thought. “I… that is. Yes.”

She didn’t hear a thing from the kitchenette. Gerald and Arnold must have been waiting with bated breath too.

A silence. Then Rhonda clicked her tongue against the upper roof of her mouth and smirked. “Helga Pataki. I have all the information you need and more. If you’re planning to ambush Olga Pataki-Johnson and ask her a myriad of questions where she won’t have the upper hand, I’m your girl.”

Helga squinted as she scrutinised Rhonda with a look. “Just like that?”

Rhonda huffed, “Really, Helga. I don’t know where you people got the idea I was a difficult person-”

(Helga could have sworn that Arnold and Gerald had just snorted into their teas. She wasn’t sure.)

“- But I am really rather easy going and willing to spill the tea just because it’s you asking.” Rhonda smiled. “I don’t do this for just anyone, you know, and you clearly need this information urgently. I’ll tell you everything you need.”

There was honestly nothing else Helga could say that could show how much she was thankful to Rhonda for her kindness. All she could say was, “I…I…can I hug you? I don’t know how to react to this, thank you so much.”

Rhonda waved her off, now grinning. “Right. You have a lot of work to do, so I need you to grab your laptop or a notebook, you’re gonna need notes. Gerald!” she yelled and Gerald startled to
attention. “I need a cup of coffee, and three sugars, and Arnold, I want you to go to the muffin store to get me 3 blueberry bran muffins, the kind with the swirl. That and an apple pie- Helga, do you need anything?”

Helga, who really didn’t want to impose, tried to say, “Yeah, I’m not that hungry-”

“Don’t be silly, we’re going to be here for awhile if you need the full expertise of what I have to offer.” She motioned to Arnold, “Get her a banana walnut muffin, two cause she needs to keep her energy up. Then get her a tea, the green one they sell at the store. I expect nothing else, Arnold.”

She glared at the man so hard Helga could have sworn he quavered. “You know my expectations, and you’ve already failed them once today. Now come on!” she clapped her hands with the last two words and the two men scattered, one running to the coffee machine to get it started, and the other grabbing his jacket and wallet before making a run for the door.

Helga resolved to not make any sort of dissenting noises on how Rhonda was running things. Sometimes it paid not to scorn a woman like Rhonda Wellington-Lloyd.
It had been late afternoon when Helga and Rhonda finally stopped work, the coffee table littered with papers, Helga’s laptop, Rhonda’s phone and muffin wrappers and cups of tea and coffee.

At some point, the windows that were before lit up with sunlight were now showing the signs of a dark stormy afternoon. If Helga took time to look out the window, she would have seen small kids playing outside while parents opened windows, yelling at them to come back inside. It would have been so reminiscent of old-time Hillwood, when Helga, Phoebe, Rhonda and some of the other kids would go out and play on the sidewalk. Helga had spent many a time playing double dutch on the pavement with the other girls, and she and Rhonda were two of the very best skippers.

Often back then, jump rope sessions would sometimes devolve into shouting matches, as each girl would inevitably yell at the other for trying to destroy their winning streak. The other would scoff, and then try to show the other the ropes on actual skipping. One of them would end up getting the ropes shown to them, then nearly slapped or tied up with the same ropes. Needless to say, both were competitive children that worked hard to make sure the other wouldn’t win.

Back then it would be hard to say that either girl liked the other very much, and it would be harder to find someone willing to eat their hat to find anything that could prove that they worked well.

If they saw what Arnold and Gerald were seeing, they would have sat in stunned silence while Arnold would provide them with a felt fedora that used to grace the head of Justin Timberlake served on a plate, alongside a side of crow, and Gerald would have sat them down, asked if they wanted a napkin to go with their meal.

“What’s that thing Helga’s doing with her mouth?” Gerald asked incredulously, nudging Arnold in the kitchen with his shoulder. “Her shoulders are shaking too. What is that? Is she cold? Sick?”

“She’s... laughing,” Arnold replied, a little shocked himself but not super surprised. “At something Rhonda just said.”

Gerald shook his head. “Rhonda seems to be showing her teeth a lot. What is that?”

“Smiling, Gerald. Rhonda is smiling.”

“Rhonda and Helga Pataki actually getting along? Damn, I mean, this is major.” Gerald whistled.

“What, were you expecting a catfight between them?” Arnold gave his Best Friend a side glance. “Helga would hurt you for that. People can work together if they are working towards a certain goal, especially women.”

“Well, yeah.” Gerald rolled his eyes. “I work in TalkBuzz, the other producers would kill me if I spouted that sort of shit in the workplace, especially if I looked like I believed it. I’m just saying. Helga and Rhonda. They’re not the best examples of people who are easy to get along with. And they’re definitely not people who have the best history together.”

“I thought you saw them at TalkBuzz getting along,” Arnold said.

“Well, yeah, but that was what, at most 15-30 mins from hours of them in the same place?” Gerald replied. “That’s not necessarily proof. The real test is hours in the same place having to work
Arnold grinned. “I’m surprised that you’re surprised-“

“I hear gossiping, boys!” Came a new voice, and the two of them turned over to see Rhonda stare them down from the couch where she was sitting. On the floor, sitting cross-legged and typing away on her laptop, Helga had looked up, and upon seeing that Rhonda was redressing the two boys, smirked and went back to typing, her shoulders shaking again from silent laughter.

Rhonda continued, “If you have time to gossip, and not share, then clearly you’re not useful here! Go get us a snack, at least- Helga, you want anything?”

“Another tea, please,” Helga replied, without looking up from her typing.

“What’s she’s asking. “ Rhonda said without missing a beat. “Come on, you have free hands!” She clapped her hands again,” Chop chop!” She snapped.

The men took off again, Arnold slower to the uptake than Gerald was. “G, we live here. Why are we listening to her in our own home?” He asked.

“I don’t hear moving!” Came the snap of Rhonda’s voice, and the two scattered, faster this time.

After the boys left, Rhonda turned to look at Helga, who was looking at her with a very impressed glint in her eye. “Nicely done, Wellington-Lloyd.” She said. “I’m not that surprised but I’m very impressed. We could use someone like you in the trenches.”

Rhonda laughed. “Please, I have to run a media empire!” She said. “Can’t keep my hand off the wheel if I had to deal with people like them.” She jerked a hand at the main door, where both men had gone through to leave a minute earlier. “They’re good, decent men, but they need training!” Rhonda winked salaciously. “I’ve got practice, in all aspects of training men. You should ask Raul. He’ll tell you where I hold the most power at.”

Helga, wisely side-stepping that particular minefield, looked at Rhonda with fondness. “You dawg.” she said. She said that with all the love in the world.

Rhonda flipped her hair, in jest, and they laughed.

“So, let’s recap,” Helga said, looking down at her notes. “Olga is married to Oliver Johnson, and he’s the oldest of three people in the family- You’ve met this guy, right? What’s he like?”

Rhonda scrunched up her face and made a gesture that meant, ‘Child needs more effort before I’d pay attention to him.’ “I’ll be honest. Oliver? Very boring man. He’s tall, blonde, and looks good in a sweater. So, what? He hasn’t done much beyond playing tennis and being a government aide, which mostly lets him network with other influential and rich people of Hillwood. When Olga and he started showing up in the social events and the country club, Olga was the interesting one.”

Helga could see that happening. “Let me guess: Olga Pataki- poor but promising, beautiful and blonde, smart, should have been with the powerful people but her middle-class roots make her seem exotic and interesting enough to be somewhat controversial.”
"Well, I wouldn’t say that.” Rhonda sniffed, looking at the invisible imperfections of her impeccable manicured nails. “Olga was basically Cinderella. The gossip was that when they were in Africa, Oliver did all her chores for her, especially when she started crying over how orphans in Africa were admirable for being so happy all the time because they didn’t know they were poor.”

Helga was appalled. “Wow.”

“ I know!” Rhonda exclaimed. “So trashy.” She picked up her phone again as a phone notification came through, still continuing the conversation. “All the society wives were saying that she was the perfect starter wife.”

"She’s certainly heartless enough to be one,” Helga muttered.

“Anyway. She and Oliver have been married for 13 years this October,” Rhonda continued and Helga nodded, doing quick calculations. That meant they were married about a month after Miriam passed. She didn’t remember them doing any wedding announcements or anything. Oliver must have proposed soon after Helga left. “They have three children: Orlando, Ophelia, and Odette-”

“Right, yeah.” Helga murmured. She remembered because their names were absolutely ludicrous but it matched up to Olga’s somewhat self-obsession with herself. Rhonda had shown a picture of the three children in question and they were virtually identical, blonde, sunny smiles, and matching private-school uniforms.

”And Oliver is due to have his vasectomy done-”

“I still can’t believe you know that,” Helga said.

“It was a scandal. Olga mentioned it to her friends at the country club and swore them to secrecy.” Rhonda sniffed. “Naturally they told me the second they left. I, at the very least, kept it a secret, but it’s an open secret amongst the women in the country club.”

“Right right.”

“That particular branch of the Vanderbilt-Johnsons is estimated to have a 100 million dollar worth, with Oliver bringing in most of the money through investments. He doesn’t earn much through his government aide job. He’s small town, anyway. But he’s excused: he’s rich enough. If he never had to work again, he and the rest of the family would still be able to live comfortably.” Rhonda continued. She then rattled off a couple of things about the house net worth, Olga’s head of the charity and her responsibilities, the private school all three children went to, and the size of their housing staff. “You got all that, right?”

Helga nodded, then winced, “Well, what I wrote was, ‘Fucking rich bastards’ but yeah. Any idea who their lawyers are?”

“Vanderbilt, Vanderbilt and Johnson, of course.” Rhonda rolled her eyes. “Talk about egoism, can you believe it?”

Helga nodded, uncertain. When Rhonda said someone else was egoistic, the impact of the statement seemed truer, somehow. Rhonda herself was not exactly a self-deprecating woman.

“How are they like?” she asked.
“Ruthless,” Rhonda said flatly. “I’ve met some of them before. Total sharks. I’m lucky my team of lawyers are just as tough. But that also means that they’re really good at what they do.”

Helga took that fact thoughtfully. This basically meant that there was a low chance what Olga was doing was advised by ill-trained experts. Olga knew what she was doing, and by extension, so did her lawyers. “Do they own any properties?”

Rhonda wrinkled her brow. “I’m not too sure on that, but I have contacts. At this point, the only ones I know are the beach house in Malibu, the house in Calabasas, the high-rise in Manhattan, the log-cabin in Aspen—”

“That is a lot of houses for someone who isn’t very clear on what houses they own—”

“I run a media empire, not a real estate agency, Helga!” Rhonda said in disgust. “The blazers are such a turn-off. Like…shoulder pads? Are you a Frankenstein Monster from the 80s rip-off of Thriller? It’s 2018 now. Lose them. And the red is not good for people who have a natural red flush. Yuck.”

“Right, right,” Helga muttered. “What about…here?”

“The real estate blazers here are HORRENDOUS.—“

“I MEANT THE PROPERTIES, RHONDA. Do you know what Oliver owns in Hillwood?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Rhonda replied, rattling off a series of properties, then turned back to look at Helga. “Anything you can use?”

Helga shook her head. None of the houses were near her old home, which probably was a sign Oliver did not want to buy the house from her so he could tear it down or something. She had a few theories on why Olga wanted her to have the house, and none of them made any sense to Helga. “Any chance of misdoings within the charity Olga heads?” she asked.

Rhonda shook her head. “Sadly, nothing juicy there. The charity apparently helps the Red Cross or something, it’s not the best. However, they’re reputable enough, and Olga charms her way to get the money from donors. It’s really…” Rhonda looked like she was searching for the correct word to explain her feelings, but in the end, settled for a shudder.

Helga laughed because in a way she got what Rhonda was talking about. “Gurl, I get it.”

“I am so glad you get it,” Rhonda said. “I’ll be honest: I have to stay nice to everyone in the Vanderbilt-Johnson family, because I love Raul, but I am not a fan of Olga.” She rolled her eyes. “Two-faced bitch.” She muttered.

Helga looked at her in shock, then burst into laughter, which set Rhonda off too. The two of them laughed hard and long. Helga mostly in relief because she had never met anyone who so completely understood what Olga was sometimes like and was actually there to see it. It wasn’t a super good sign that Olga was still the same, but GOD it was a relief.

Helga let the laughter trail off, and in the companionable silence that happened after that, she asked, “Why are you giving me all this info anyway?” she asked. “I thought you and Olga would get along, considering the amount of time you probably see each other at the country club, and the fact that you’re both considered royalty since you’re now in the same money bracket. And you’re DATING
ONE OF THE JOHNSONS. Aren’t the rich people protective of their own or something?"

Rhonda gave Helga a long, serious look. Before Helga could apologise, Rhonda sighed. “Okay.” She said. “What I’m talking about here does NOT go anywhere outside this room. I’ve never told anyone about that time. Except Raul. But you can NOT tell anyone. Your poetry led me down some really deep places, and I think I found my soul there and then. So I’m telling you. But don’t you DARE say a word.”

Helga nodded, setting her laptop on the floor so she could sit comfortably to hear Rhonda’s story.

Rhonda took a deep breath, released it, and took a sip out of her coffee mug. She made a face. “Cold, eurgh.” She grumbled. “Cold coffee is the worst.” She set it down on the table, wiping her lips as she did so.

“On the third anniversary of my company opening,” she continued, shifting her weight side to side. “I held a party for all my investors and stockholders and invited the most influential families, including the Vanderbilt-Johnsons. Olga was there, both because she was now a Johnson by marriage and was head of the charity that we had raised money for. She congratulated me, told me I should be proud of having TalkBuzz, and then toasted to my contributions.

“I was really happy. I was surrounded by the fruit of my success, and I actually worked hard for it! So when I went to the bathroom, I was really excited, and was feeling super good about it when I heard Olga and her friends come in.”

Here, Rhonda paused, a little hesitant to go on. Helga nodded at her, patiently waiting for her to continue.

“One of them asked if Olga knew me from the old days, and then another joked that Olga and I were basically the same people, since we went to public school, slummed it with the middle class, and became heads of our own organizations and companies. And that bitch actually said, ‘Well, you can’t just compare the both of us like that. I at the very least made something of myself out of nothing. Rhonda’s made a trifling company that’s bound to fail at some point. I give it 6 months. Tops.’”

Helga whistled. That seemed a bit harsh, even for Olga. “That’s shit.” She sympathised.

“I know!” Rhonda exclaimed. “Then when someone told her off for that, the woman actually sniffed and then said, ‘At least I’m making something of myself, and changing the world. TalkBuzz is basically watched by teenagers.’ I was so furious that I cried when they left.”

“You…cried?” Helga asked. That didn’t sound like Rhonda, at all.

”Hey, I’m human too!” Rhonda retorted defensively. “I was really proud of my company! I failed the first time with my website, after talking such a big game about it. No one believed in me, I was so proud proving everyone wrong! That woman just made my accomplishments feel small and made me feel like a child!”

She ended the speech looking down, fists balled up, jaw really set. When Rhonda was 8, she accidentally did something really stupid that she too knew was very wrong, and all Helga could remember was that exact same pose she was doing now. It seemed that she hadn’t given that up.

Silence. Then, “Fuck, I’m so sorry Rhonda. She did that to me too, but I didn’t expect her to do it to others.” Helga said. She wasn’t sure what to comfort Rhonda with.
Rhonda sniffed audibly, raising her chin and still not looking at Helga. “I should be thanking you, actually. During that party, when I walked back out, someone mentioned your poetry and how it would be good to talk about it on the site, so I googled and read some of your work when I got back. I cried—”

“Liar.”

“No, cross my heart and hope to die!” Rhonda protested. “All true! I swear to Lana Del Rey that I cried like it was summer and it was sad! *Can of Beans* made me cry so hard! I could literally feel the abandonment you felt in the piece!” She looked back at Helga. “The last time you came back to Hillwood, I wasn’t sure if you understood how much your work meant to me, and I just want you to know that you mean more to me than the fashion styling on the Met Ball red carpet.”

Helga smiled back. She was at once used to and unused to compliments about her work, and she was even more thrown off by the fact that it was Rhonda doing it. Stuck up, sometimes still kinda shallow Rhonda. “Thank you for saying that,” she said softly.

Rhonda smiled back, and then threw herself at Helga for a hug, just as the door opened and Arnold and Gerald came back into the apartment.

“‘We’re back- OMG IF YOU’RE GOING TO GET BUSY PUT A SOCK ON THE DOOR, RHONDA. I KEEP TELLING YOU THIS! RESPECT MY PRIVACY FOR NOT WANTING TO INTRUDE ON YOUR PRIVACY! SOCK ON THE DOOR RHONDA! I DEAL WITH THIS IN THE OFFICE, I DON’T NEED THIS NOW!’

“So… is Gerald okay?” Helga asked Arnold hesitantly.

Rhonda had finally left, and Helga and Arnold were in the living room, clearing up the garbage. Gerald was walking Rhonda down to her car and was currently not in the apartment.

“G? Yeah.” Arnold chuckled. “He’s just exasperated. According to him, he’s walked into Rhonda and Raul getting busy in her office more than a few times, so he’s a bit too used to seeing Rhonda expressing her sexuality. Doing it in his own house was just a bit much.”

“She was only hugging me. He knows that, right?” Helga smirked. “I do my seducing of rich white women elsewhere.” She waved a hand at the apartment. “This is not the most conducive place to get a glucose matriarch.”

“A…”

“Sugar mummy, Arnoldo, get with the program. Also, Rhonda would make a very demanding sugar mummy.”

“Oh god, yeah.” Arnold shuddered. “When she made me date her that one week in high school, she kept throwing money at me to do stuff for her. Pick me up, wear a corsage, make sure that people see you recycling so they know you’re sensitive, buy me this Balenciaga ring with the money I gave you.” Arnold shook his head. “Long, long week. Then I had to duck assassination attempts. Thad was not happy at all.”

They both laughed.

“So… did you find anything useful?” Arnold asked.

Helga nodded. “Quite a bit, actually. I’ve got an address on where Olga lives. And yet… nothing
good to figure out what Olga is up to giving me the house.”

“Damn, I’m sorry.”

“No no.” Helga replied. “It was good. Rhonda told me stuff that made me understand her a bit more. We’re probably never going to be BFFs, but I like her more, and will not be running away from her if I ever see her on the sidewalk.”

“That’s a good sign.” Arnold nodded. “I used to be so afraid of her I would duck into the corridors trying to hide from her. It was tiring dealing with her. I’m happy you two are being friends.”

Helga stopped short. “FUCK, I JUST REMEMBERED I FORGOT TO TEXT EUGENE AND PHOEBE!” she cried, running out of the room. “I am so sorry, I have to call them, I’ll be right back, I’LL CLEAN UP AFTERWARDS!”

She ran off to the room just as Gerald walked back into the apartment, looking exhausted.

“Rhonda get back okay?” Arnold asked.

“I’m telling ya, Arnold. Having my boss in my work and my personal space is just hard work.” Gerald shook his head. “I want my boss to not be my friend. I get annoyed at her, and then I get sorry for her when she tells me things, and she keeps trying to have sex with Raul in the common room. It’s tiring.” The man slumped on one of the two high chairs they had in their kitchenette. “I’m so happy you’re my roommate and you’re exploring your sexuality privately.”

Arnold turned a bright red. “Please don’t mention me exploring my sexuality in front of Helga. Or Nadine. For two very different reasons. For my sake.”

Gerald smirked. “So how long is Helga going to be here for?” he asked. “I have nothing against homegirl, but I need to know in case you plan to do a little…” Here he inserted a bunch of noises that pop culture would immediately interpret as bed creaking noises, aka the sexy noises.

Arnold spluttered, “I am-What! That’s a lie! They’re all lies!”

Gerald cackled. He had apparently learnt a lot more from Grandma Gertie than just her dumpling recipe. “Ah… maybe this is it, my man. This will be the time!”

“The time to?” Arnold asked warily. Why did he have to ask about stuff like this? His brain knew it was going to be bad but still he had to frigging ask. Damn his cat brain. Damn his brain to hell!

“The time when you guys get to date!” Gerald exclaimed.

Damn his ex-best friend. Damn his ex-best friend straight to hell.

”I mean, you get a chance to spend time with her!” Gerald said excitedly. “You don’t get chances like that …like AT ALL! This could be your ticket! This will be amazing! This will not be like that time when I told you to try and get a little more exciting and then you tried to do so with that 50 Shades woman! I’m actually rooting for you two!”

Arnold was so speechless that when Gerald snapped his fingers as a bright idea struck him, he didn’t react. “Oh my fuck. THE CHEESE FESTIVAL.”

Wait what.

“Wait what?” he said out loud.
“You should take her to the Cheese Festival.”

“What.”

“Dude, THINK ABOUT IT. That place is romantic!”

“That festival celebrates cheese, Gerald.”

“Cheese is the food of love!”

“Cheese causes people to have uncontrollable gas, Gerald.”

“The Cheese Festival is romantic as hell, Arnold!” Gerald proclaimed. “You know that, you took Lila there for a date back in the day! Tunnel of Love, wine tasting…they even got that Eiffel Tower and styled everything to look a bit like France.”

“Wait…when did that happen?” Arnold asked, a bit surprised. His last memories of the Cheese Festival had him remember everything resembling a country aesthetic, with elements like hay, wagons and red-wooden barns. It was the very definition of a stereotypical version of what the country was like to urban city-folk.

“Last few years!” Gerald said. “The hipsters wanted to keep the farm aesthetic, the tourism board said no, they had an argument, the hipsters threatened to pull out the funding…so they all came to a compromise. The barnyards are now French, and everyone’s dressed like French maids, the hay comes from France, kids get to milk a cow called Frenchie, there’s usually a very bad parody of Les Miserables…”

“I haven’t missed much not going in the last few years,” Arnold remarked just as Helga came out of the room, panting. He looked over at her. “All good, I hope?” Arnold asked.

Helga smiled wanly. “Good, yeah. Phoebe yelled at me for not calling her straight away, gave me a lecture on staying with strangers before I could tell her where I was, Eugene was crying and told me he ate all my food in the kitchen…so all’s good. They said hi, by the way.” She leaned against the kitchenette. “So what’s happening?” she asked.

“Arnold and I were talking about the Cheese Festival!” Gerald said before Arnold could change the subject.

Damnit Gerald. Damn him and his mouth.

“The Cheese Festival still exists?” Helga laughed. “Christ, already I feel like a kid again. Do kids still go on dates to that thing?”

Arnold didn’t reply, because Gerald happily did it for him. “Yeap, and adults too!”

Arnold could have sworn Gerald had directed that at him. He was wondering if he could renounce his ex-best friend and become friends with Thad. Sure, he did try to kill him for a period in the 2000s, but he was better than Gerald, the cad.

“Maybe I should go down.” Helga wondered out loud. “I mean, childhood and all that…but I’m not even sure how long I’d be here for.” Helga smiled wanly. “By the way, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I’d be coming down, Gerald.”

“No trouble at all.” Gerald smirked. “We have guests that crash here all the time. Granted, most of them were mine, and they stayed over in my room…”
If looks could kill, Gerald would have been slaughtered Game of Thrones style right there and then. All Arnold’s glare did was to make Gerald smirk even more.

”You sure you don’t want to take Arnold’s room, Helga?” Gerald continued. “I mean, it’s a bed and all… Arnold’s always had a very good night sleeping in that bed, it’s comfortable, it’s big, there’s practically room for two…”

Helga rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Nah, I mean, look at Arnold!” she said, gesturing towards the blonde man in question. “He’s cute and all, but he needs beauty sleep to maintain that cute. How else is he going to get a girlfriend and give you grandbabies?”

Gerald cackled. “Ooh gurl, you and I are going to be great friends. You’re not my type, but I will settle for making collages with you and giggling while we wear sweaters.”

”Oh hooooo, Tall-Hair Boy, I can do that. Also, I can set you up with someone too. We’ll get lunch, we’ll talk shop…”

The both of them rattled on, and Arnold saw his future.

It’s happening. He thought. My best friend and the woman I might be in love with are becoming good friends. They’re gonna kill me somehow. I just know this. Somehow they’re gonna find a way to kill me in this apartment.

Helga looked over at Arnold and smiled, snapping her fingers to make a finger gun at him. The tension in Arnold’s head relaxed just a little.

*God she’s kinda cool when she does that. And cute too.*

Gerald laughed, and gave Arnold a wink.

*I need a new best friend.* He thought furiously.
Sunday evening, after Gerald and Arnold ordered takeout to eat in their apartment, and Helga insisted on paying for her share of the food, the three of them cleared up the kitchen, laughing and talking as they did so.

“So what are you going to do tomorrow?” Arnold asked Helga as she casually helped wipe dishes. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I might be able to take the day off from work, the kids have a writing exercise they have to finish and they still need help.”

Helga rolled her eyes and laughed. “I’m not taking you away from your kids. I’ve seen it when your class thought Nadine was taking your virtue away, and they were hysterical. If it gets out you took a day off to accompany a woman they have never met before, I think half the class would end up in the hospital.”

Arnold winced. “I was actually worried they would hurt the relief teacher but yes they are a little unruly…”

Then, his face lit up. It was like he had a really good idea.

“You should come to school with me!” Arnold said excitedly.

Helga looked at him as though he was nuts. “You nuts or something?” she asked. “Arnold, I’m a 29 going on 30-year-old woman. I haven’t been near the premises since 2000 something-”

“No no, it’s all good!” Arnold said excitedly. “Remember the class talk we had to reschedule on? This will be perfect! You can come down and conduct the talk there and then!” He grinned. “You can also come see Nadine and say hi to Mr Simmons. He was so upset that he missed you the last time you visited the last time. If you came over, I think he would be really happy!”

Helga tried to remember the last time she saw Mr Simmons. The tall, balding man with hair like dark butter had been crying when he left the doorstep of the townhouse, after saying goodbye to Helga and her family the night before they moved to Michigan. At the time she had been tired of people crying over her like her moving was a devastating, life-changing move to them when really it was more a devastating, life-changing move for her and her only. Why did people seem to make it all about them when it was her life that was going to hell forever?

In retrospect, Helga had not been in the best frame of mind when she was 12.

And perhaps a tad dramatic.

“Hm, it might actually be a good idea.” Helga mused. “I’ve always wanted to hold a talk. You know, children are the future, teach them well and let them lead the way. Show them all the beauty
they possess inside-”

Arnold nodded cheerfully. “I’m so glad you feel that way! Though if you did feel that way, why didn’t you become a teacher? I didn’t know you wanted to inspire children-”

“Arnold. Dude. I was quoting Whitney. You know, the singer?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

The both of them fell silent. Gerald silently shaking with laughter in the living room area did not break the tension at all.

Helga was the first to crack up. “I cannot believe you don’t know about Whitney Houston’s best song ever!” she chortled. “How do you not know that song? Do you even know your music?”

“Hey hey,” Arnold said, faux-sterlynly. “Everyone knows Whitney Houston’s best song is Dance With Somebody! It encompasses the joy of Whitney, the want to love someone, and dance!”

“Uhhuh, sure.” Helga teased, as she walked over to muss Arnold’s hair a little. “Delude yourself a little more on that, blondie.”

“AND AY YEEEEEE AAHHHHHHHHH YEEEEEEEEE AAHHHHHHH WILL ALWAYS LAHRVE YUUUUUUUUU-HOOOOOOOOO0000--OOOOO.” Blasted music coming out from somewhere, startling Helga and surprising Arnold hard enough to nearly drop a dish on the floor. When both looked up to find the source of the music, they found Gerald, who was blasting Whitney Houston out of his Spotify app on his phone, grinning up a storm.

”THIS ONE!” Gerald yelled to answer their questioning stares. “Best Whitney song! Nothing else compares! Works for so many occasions! It could be later, it could be now…”

Helga was sure Gerald winked at them. She thought it was charming, and she did agree. That song was a classic. She gave him a thumbs up.

Arnold, looking exasperated, placed the dish down and made a lunge at Gerald, trying to grab the phone. Gerald sidestepped, dodging Arnold’s attack just as Arnold made another lunge, this time more successful. They spent a few minutes tussling on the floor.

Helga may have taken the opportunity to get her phone to take a few shots while the two boys were wrestling. Maybe even a video. She knew a bunch of her friends who liked watching men wrestle, especially handsome men like him. She sent the video to Phoebe and Eugene and the fans of wrestling, then sat on the couch looking through her phone waiting for the two to finish.

The next day, Arnold and a very grumpy Helga were in the kitchen, bright and early.

Too fucking bright and early in Helga’s case, thought Arnold as he looked over at the very slumped body of Helga Pataki over the kitchenette.

“It’s 7 am!” Helga groaned, head flat on the table. “Why. Why did I agree to your goody-two-shoes suggestion of going to school to be a good role model? I’m too young to be a role model. I have piercings! I may or may not have a tattoo. I have been arrested for civil disobedience a few times. I am not the one to show the way-”
“Helga,” Arnold said patiently, placing a mug of coffee in front of her. “Come on. We have thirty more minutes before we catch the bus. Drink this coffee. Then go brush your teeth and get dressed.”

Helga turned blurry eyes up at Arnold. She should not be able to look as charismatic as she did with messy hair, dressed in a t-shirt and track pants. “Why are you dressed?”

Arnold’s first instinct, which was to blush, was tamped down by a sense of duty to get Helga up and ready for school. “These are my school clothes, Helga.” He said neutrally. “People wear clothes to keep warm or to express their individuality or even look professional.”

“No no,” Helga mumbled. She took a small swig of her coffee before she started again. “Why plaid? Why are you wearing plaid?”

Arnold looked down at his shirt, a red and blue plaid with white stripes that ran through the entire shirt. He wore it because it was getting cold and it was one of his warmest shirts. “Plaid is … comfortable?” he said. And yes, phrasing it like a question definitely made sense in context.

Helga took another sip. “No, plaid makes you look like a nerd.”

“I’m a teacher, Helga. To the kids, I probably am a nerd.”

Helga snorted, “Clearly.” She downed the rest of the contents and made to walk to the sink to get the mug rinsed and cleaned, but Arnold snagged it before she did.

“No, I’ll get it rinsed.” he insisted. “You go get dressed and get ready. Be here in the next 20 mins.”

“15!” she yelled back, wandering off to Arnold’s room to grab her clothes and run to the bathroom, leaving Arnold alone with his thoughts as he washed the mug.

He wasn’t super sure what he was doing, bringing Helga back to PS 118. She had agreed to coming to give a talk in the morning due to her not having anything else to do, but afterwards, …what was she going to do? Wander the city? Skip rocks at the pier? Learn how to macramé?

He really should think through some of his suggestions before blurtting them out. Like inviting Helga over to stay. He was having some self-doubts letting Helga stay on the couch. It may have been pretty comfy, but people got cold, right? Was the heater even warm enough? The apartment was old and so sometimes the heater didn’t work very well.

He groaned, running his hand through his hair and grumbled when he remembered that he had slicked his head back with pomade. He wanted to give it a little hold, his hair sometimes got a bit long and flopped everywhere. He was pretty sure the sculpture he created out of his hair was okay until now, and now it was sorta ruined and he would look ridiculous.

Did he have enough time to change and redo his hair? he wondered.

“Nah, you look fine, bro.” Gerald’s voice reached his ears.

“Gah!” Arnold jumped, turning to look at a casual Gerald wearing a large oversized shirt, scratching his chin where stubble grew and nodding wisely, like a wise black man.

Which he was.

In Gerald’s own opinion, that is.

“Where the hell did you come from?” Arnold replied testily. “Also, what?”
“You were talking out loud, my man!” Gerald nodded, sipping his own mug of steaming hot coffee. “You do that when you’re nervous. We’ve talked about this, remember?”

Arnold sighed, keeping one eye on the hallway in case Helga kept to her word of getting ready in 15 minutes. “I’m worried about her.” he told Gerald.

“Why?” Gerald asked. “Is this case of the bed again? I keep telling you, be her friend and offer her your bed. While you’re in it. And if you get worried about her, you can check her over yourself. Over, under, in between—”

Arnold slapped Gerald in the arm and Gerald choked on his coffee, looking at Arnold with big brown wounded eyes.

”Why must you hurt me this way, baby?” Gerald pretended to sob, dabbing his eyes. “All I offer is advice to advance your love life, and you need it so badly—”

“Why are you up, G?” Arnold asked. “You’re usually asleep for another hour at least.”

“And miss my man trying to get a move on?” Gerald asked incredulously, sipping his coffee again.

Arnold sighed. “We’re just friends, and I’m not looking for any sort of romance, and neither is she. She’s here to figure what’s happening with her family, I’m glad we’re helping her, that’s all. You teasing us isn’t going to work.”

“Well, hope springs eternal,” Gerald raised his mug in a mock-toast. “Love is, as they say, rather lovely.” He glugged the rest of his coffee and reached over to pour another cup for himself. “I’m just glad I’m here and I approve your potential girlfriend.”

”Stop saying that, G—”

“Saying what?” Came Helga’s voice as she strode down the hallway. “Hey Arnold, since you’re being all nerdy and shit, how’s this for school? I gotta match up in case people start judging me for being an expert or something.”

She was dressed uncharacteristically in a white collar shirt, under her usual leather jacket, paired with a pair of dress pants and chunky heeled boots. Her hair was up in a ponytail, she had somehow managed to line her eyes in near no time at all, and she had a small tube of chapstick in her hands, uncapping it to draw it all over her lips. “Damn this dry winter.” she grumbled. “Well?” she demanded.

Arnold was silently looking over her. Damnit, if he thought Helga after hours stuck on a plane looked pretty, the woman was gorgeous cleaned up and looking professional. Sort of. It was clean cut and still had the bit of edge Helga had in her usual wear, like seeing a sharp knife covered in a woolen sweater. It was beautiful. She was beautiful.

He probably had to say something before Gerald started laughing at his ass again.

A short sharp laugh that was hastily covered up proved that he was too late in that aspect.

Helga looked at both of them anxiously. “That tells me nothing!” she yelled. “Yes? No? Professional enough? PG and suitable for people of all ages, with minor supervision from an adult if the minor is under 13?”

Arnold found the courage to swallow his first instinct, which was to shout, “Marry me and have my kids!” and said, “Yeah, I like it.” he said, feigning a nonchalant look of nonchalance. “Very
“Professional. Mr Simmons would be proud.”

“Good.” Helga nodded, looking slightly mollified. She took her phone out of her pocket, gave it a glance and grinned. “Fuck yeah, 14.5 mins. Told you I could do it.”

“Was there a challenge?” Arnold asked drily.

“You said 20! I got it done in 15!” She retorted. She then cursed. “Fuck I forgot my bag, brb!” She yelled as she ran back to the room.

“Mmm, mmmm, mmm!” hummed Gerald. “Girl got her references wrong.”

“What?”

“Girl looks nothing like a nerd.”

“Oh yeah, that.”

“Girl looks more like the female cop off every hit CBS program who’s tough but fair and looks great doing it.”

“Yeah. She’s gorgeous.”

“Meanwhile, you look like the lab tech that looks busy in the background.”

“Right, I get it.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask, Arnold. Why plaid?”

“It’s comfortable, Gerald.”

“You really need more school ties or something. The sweaters are a problem too.”

“Go away, Gerald.”

“Does Simmons know I’m coming?” Helga asked as they sat on the bus going towards school. “I mean, terrorism laws, stranger danger and all that.”

Arnold shook his head. “I messaged the school administration assistant and he told me it should be a snap, just fill up the form when you get to the main office, and show your ID, but Simmons doesn’t know you’re coming, it’s not that important—“

“Is it weird that you have never referred to him with his first name before?” Helga asked, wrinkling her nose. “Shouldn’t you, as his colleague and comrade in arms, he comfortable calling him by his first name?”

An uncomfortable pause while Arnold shifted in his seat next to her. “Well...”

“Oh my god, I knew it!” Helga laughed. “You can’t do it, can you? You’re too used to him being your teacher you can’t bear to do it! You’re polite as hell!”

Arnold sighed. “Look, it was too embarrassing for both of us, okay? It’s weird that he and I are working together and it’s even weirder for me to call him Bobby or Robert—“

“Holy fuck, Bobby-“ Helga leaned back against her seat, eyes alight. “Bobby Simmons! It’s so
frigging adorable and it suits him to a T! No wonder you can’t do it, it’s too cute!”

Arnold, resigned, still had one last weapon. “Well, since we’re talking about it... what about you? You’ve never called him Bobby either! “

“... point.” Helga conceded ruefully. “But it sounds rude when you call someone of authority by their first name, doesn’t it?”

“Exactly!” Arnold said. “Nadine can do it, no problem but she handles snakes and spiders, she knows nothing of fear!”

Helga’s lips curled up into a lazy smile. “Damn that girl is hot, being able to handle snakes and spiders.” She sighed. “I could use someone like that around the house.”

Arnold looked at her, “Oh?”

“Yeah, between you and me, I’m scared of rats. Eugene’s not a huge fan of spiders. When one appears in the apartment,

we usually get the other to help catch and release outside far away or something. Once, there was a spider and rat infestation going on at the same time in our old apartment. That was not a good week. “

Arnold nodded,” I can see that happening. You will be pleased to know that we haven’t had a rat incident in our building since 2001.”

“That’s good to know- wait does this mean they will come back?”

“Erm...”

Luckily Arnold was saved from having to answer that question and Helga was saved from having to hear the answer as the bus pulled up to the stop nearest PS 118. They both got up eagerly and left, thankful for the distraction.

As the two of them walked down the pavement that led to the school, chatting lightly, Helga’s nostalgia hit her fully when she finally reached PS 118.

It hadn’t changed much. Sure, now there were things that were definitively different: for one thing, the school was surrounded by a fence, with signs warning trespassers to clear off. Helga could see that the pavement in the school grounds looked a bit more dowdy and dusty. In her memory she always remembered the ground to be dark as tar, and what she was looking at was a more ashy grey than ever. The school was still the same, though the paint on the outer walls had indeed faded. It still looked well taken care of, but to Helga, the school just seemed a lot more smaller.

Or, it could also be Helga being unused to the school being what it was, large and frightening to a small child, but to a slightly more self-assured adult: a school that had seen thousands of children walk in and out of their doors and bearing all the wear and tear over the years.

She had to stop for a minute to marvel at the sight, almost letting Arnold walk further into the school before he realised that his guest was still standing outside.

“Wow, “ She said, hands that were suddenly sweaty tucked away into her pockets. How was she suddenly so nervous about coming back to school like this? She was 30 this year! It shouldn’t be so hard, should it?
“You okay?” Arnold asked, and she could hear the concern in his voice.

She swallowed. “Y-yeah!” She managed to say weakly. “Never better!”

Arnold, to his credit, didn’t look too assured by her reply. “Remember,” he said, looking down at her in a way that got her a little nervous. “I’m here. I’ve got you. The last time you walked down the halls you pushed people aside and bellowed, ‘Hey, I’m walking here!’ You’re still that person. Just a bit better at understanding social cues. Okay?”

Helga swallowed again. She took a deep breath, and said, in a shaky voice. “I am Helga.” That didn’t sound like her. She tried again, in a louder, sterner voice. “I’m Helga G Pataki. And I’m walking here. “

“That’s good, you’re doing great!” Arnold nodded encouragingly.

“I’m Helga G Pataki and I’m walking here, Football Head!”

“Yes, now one more time!” He said laughingly.

“I’m Helga G Pataki and I’m fucking walking here!” She yelled out, pumping her fist up like a champion boxer. Arnold was good at pepping people up, it was amazing!

Arnold winced, looking around to see if anyone else heard. “Kids, Helga. Keep it PG here!”

“Oh right, right, sorry.” She said sheepishly as a parent and her child walked by, saying, “Well I never!” in a horrified voice.

“Sorry Mrs Nickapopulous!” Arnold yelled out in a sheepish voice. The woman only sniffed and kept walking.

“Boy this place has changed quite a bit huh?” Helga said in a distracted voice, too busy looking all around to pay any attention to where she was going. Arnold had to stop and hold her by the shoulder before she accidentally wandered away.

“Yeah, it’s changed quite a bit.” He said. “Wifi routers, better lighting, better lockers, Mr Simmons thought it would be more conducive if the school had more stuff like that. Wurtz apparently couldn’t get the funds to work but Simmons did, which was a godsend. The teachers didn’t even need to strike.”

They reached the administrative office, and Arnold pushed the frosted glass door open, holding it so Helga could walk in before he did.

The receptionist at the front desk looked up, face lighting up at the sight of the blonde teacher walking in. Then they took notice that he wasn’t alone, and with a woman to boot. Their eyes narrowed.

“Mr Shortman, you don’t need to bring the new students in all the time,” the receptionist said, dour voiced and looking sour. “Tammy Baker can do it, it’s her turn to be the Welcome Wagon–”

Helga bristled a little, but Arnold merely smiled. “Ms Pataki is here as an instructor and guest today, I cleared it with Jonathan yesterday. Where is he anyway?”

“He’s down with the flu.” The receptionist said, relenting just a little, though still looking at Helga with a bit of a sneer. “Your guest would need to sign a form to get a Visitor’s Pass–”
“Arnold, good morning, what an amazing day to be alive—by my stars is it… it can’t be!”

A tall man had walked out of the office marked Principal and had greeted Arnold cheerily before his eyes settled on the blonde woman next to him, his eyes growing larger as his voice showed no signs of hiding his excitement. What hair that remained on his head had faded to a light pale blonde, becoming wispier and soft. His eyes showed more crow’s feet and laugh lines around his mouth but he still dressed in a collared shirt and sweater vest, with a brown jacket over the ensemble. The pure joy radiating from his eyes was still the same, and he moved like a much younger man. Mr Robert Simmons was, at age 57, was still very much the educator.

“Helga G Pataki! Oh Helga, it’s been ages since we last saw you!” Mr Simmons had walked around the receptionist desk to envelop Helga into a crushing hug. The woman, not too sure if she should hug back, instead patted him gently on the back, in a comforting, “Yes, yes, I am real and I am here,” gesture.

He released her from the tight hug, beaming from ear to ear. “One of my last few shining stars from my first class has come back!” he laughed. “Not that you are my only shining star, every student is special in their own special way, and even more so in this new generation. But then again, you’re one of the few who hasn’t been back in a long while!”

Helga still had no idea what to say to such an enthusiastic welcome, but Arnold, luckily, saved the day. “Helga’s here to give a talk to my 4th grade class for English for their writing assignments.”

“Oh how wonderful!” Mr Simmons enthused. “I often wished I had the chance to bring in a writer to talk to your class but often than not, it was never to be. Of course, you wouldn’t need it, Helga, you’ve turned out so well, with your stories and your poetry!”

Helga, who really was at the end of her tether trying to figure out what to say to Mr Simmons, could only smile and nod.

“Oh, Arnold, you wouldn’t mind if you let me borrow Helga for a minute, would you? I have to show her the Wall!”

Arnold’s smiled faded just a little. It wasn’t as noticeable, but Helga caught it immediately. “Wall? What wall?” she sputtered.

With one hand steering her back, Mr Simmons directed her to his office. “I collect mementoes and autographs from all my students that I have ever taught over the years!” He said cheerfully.” All photos taken, all the little gifts…Harold’s given me a 20% off all meat and meat by-products coupon at his store, but he’s forgotten that I became vegan in the late 2000s after discovering Buddhism, so I put it up instead.” He stopped in front of his back wall and gestured. “Voila!” he said.

Helga stared. The whole wall was covered with pictures and other things and from the sheer volume of items displayed, Mr Simmons had gotten one from near every student he encountered in PS 118. There was the aforementioned coupon next to a photo of Mr Simmons and Peter standing next to a tall, huge man who was wearing an apron and a paper service hat, clearly Harold Berman who had grown even bigger than his childhood self.

Next to a green ribbon was a delicately-made greeting card, alongside a photo of a redhead woman who was wearing a thick green sweater and a gold horseshoe on a chain. Lila Sawyer, judging by the green. Mr Simmons was next to her and standing in front of them was a small child that looked like Lila in every way.
There was a photo of Rhonda that looked like it was taken from editorial spread, signed off with, “Forever My Inspiration, Rhonda.” There was a leaf that looked suspiciously like a dried up cannabis leaf that accompanied the note, “To my favourite teacher who believed in me,” signed with an X. (Helga’s theory of Stinky becoming a weed farmer only grew from that note.)

Helga even managed to spy on a picture of Phoebe, wearing her high school graduation cap and gown, along with the note: “You were the first teacher who taught me how to learn. Thank you!” Helga’s eyes softened. She wasn’t able to make the trip to see Phoebe back then, because she was so broke that she opted to save money for school. Phoebe looked really happy then, standing next to Gerald and Mr Simmons.

Then she saw a picture of Arnold and Nadine and she grinned. Mr Simmons had clearly caught both of them by surprise, and Arnold and Nadine looked a little thrown in the picture when Mr Simmons threw his arms around their necks. He was the only one who knew about the camera, as demonstrated by the fact that Arnold had whipped cream on his face from the cake he was holding, and Nadine’s false lash looked wonky. The caption under the photo wrote, “Teach them well and let them lead the way.”

She looked back up to see Mr Simmons standing, hands around his back, beaming wistfully at his wall. “I like to collect things that remind me of each and every student that I have ever met.” he said. “They’ve taught me a lot, over the years, and you were one of my most challenging students, you know.”

Helga smiled, but she knew that smile had a tinge of shame. “Mr Simmons…I never got the chance to tell you…thank you so much.”

Mr Simmons looked baffled. “What for?” He asked, in concern. “You were so self-sufficient when I taught you, I barely had to guide you. You somehow knew the way to doing things. I always wished that I was like you when I was nine.”

Helga laughed, derisively. “You were one of the first people who told me I could write.” she said. “You read all my poetry, and encouraged the sentiment and the sap. No other male teacher could do that, but you did. You even gave me little notes under all my poems telling me how I could improve on them.” She looked down, a little ashamed. “And you didn’t rat me out to anyone. I...should have appreciated that a little more.”

Mr Simmons smiled softly, “Helga, I would never.” He walked over in front of her. “And it wasn’t much. Not at all. I just understood the importance of keeping a secret and maintaining a reputation in front of others. That’s all.”

“But you helped me so much.” Helga said, a little guiltily. “And back then…I called you a Cream Puff and even Granola Boy-“

“Would it surprise you if I told you that I knew?” Mr Simmons said. Helga’s eyes widened. “I do listen to what people say outside the classroom. And I’ll be honest, I’m not the textbook definition of masculine…that would be Peter.” He looked at her. “Oh, I haven’t told you yet. I’m a gay educator living with my partner of 25 years,” he said. He weakly grinned, raising his arms. “Oh no, don’t arrest me,” he joked.

“Yeah…that wouldn’t be fair, seeing as I’m a bi-sexual woman in my 30s,” Helga replied, giving him a watery smile. Mr Simmons looked at her, agape.
“Oh…Helga...”

“Ironic, isn’t it?” She said, choking on a laugh. “I thought about it sometimes, after I came out. And...it was shit, what I did.”

“Oh no, no no, never.” Mr Simmons rushed over to reassure her, with arms on both her shoulders. “Peter said I forgive too easily, so what the hell, I never got mad at you or anyone that called me names. I lived through worse times.” Seeing Helga’s remorseful face, he added, “Truth be told, I think back to the day I realised I was losing my hair with a lot more panic and sadness than when I tried to come out as gay.”

Helga struggled against laughing, but failed, and Mr Simmons face lit up. “There we go, there’s a smile!” he said. He looked back at her earnestly. “Helga. You were an expressive kid. And it takes time for people to change, decades sometimes. You worked on your feelings and emotions, and I’m glad you came back and told me all about it. Of all my students from my first class to come back… you’re the one I was really anticipating the most.”

Helga started smiling, but she didn’t know she was, she was too busy crying to realise it.

When Mr Simmons gave her a hug this time round though, she knew what to do, and hugged him back.

Chapter End Notes

don’t fucking hold it against me, I’m not crying, you are.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

It's short but it was a good stopping point, and I managed to push in a plot element!

A few minutes after Arnold let Mr Simmons take Helga into his office to show her the wall, Nadine found Arnold pacing in the school office, lost in his thoughts.

In fact, he was so lost that he ploughed right into Nadine, causing her to fall to the ground skittering on her wedge heels.

“Jesus!” Nadine yelled, on the ground and raising her head to find the perpetrator. “Shortman? Damnit! Control yourself! Stop being so you for a minute!”

Arnold, who was going to take offence at that part later, yelled, “I’m so sorry, Nadine!” He bent over and stretched a hand out, and she grabbed it as he helped her up.

“What the hell was that about?” Nadine demanded, brushing the dust off her dress. The receptionist at the desk rolled her eyes. “You smoking something?” Her eyes lit up,” Oh wait, are you really smoking something? Is it herbal? Can I try it?”

Scandalised, Arnold stared at Nadine like she had offered to murder a cat. “Nadine! I’m not smoking anything- that was ages ago! We don’t talk about it anymore!”

She rolled her eyes, “Yeah yeah, you developed your straight edge self after college, blah blah blah, you don’t even ride a bike anymore, you’re a good example to the children, what is even a bass guitar, cause you don’t play rock music, jazz is the wave of the future…”

He really had to make more friends outside of his elementary school days. Nadine was fun but she had way too many memories of him and was potentially stockpiling them for a future blackmailing attempt. “How are we friends, Nadine? “ he asked conversationally.

“Psh, you were there, you remember. “Nadine chided him. “Now, why are you here pacing? Did Bobby summon you here or something?”

Before Arnold could reply, the office door marked,” Principal” opened and Mr Simmons and Helga walked out, arms around each other, both laughing.

“…I’m so happy to see you back here! You have to come back later so I can get a photo of us I can put on my Wall! “ Mr Simmons eagerly said.

“Why not do it now?” Helga suggested drily. “We’re both right here and everything…”

“Always a sharp one!” Mr Simmons laughed. “I have a camera somewhere…”

Nadine, who looked dumbfounded seeing Helga talking to Mr Simmons, and then searching for a
Polaroid camera around the office, turned an accusing eye towards Arnold, who gulped. She grabbed his shirt sleeve and pulled him close.

“Arnold Ignatius Shortman, did you withhold information from me?” She hissed. “Helga Pataki is back in town, and currently in the place you work, and I'm the last to know? How dare you?”

Arnold was confused. “Rhonda didn’t tell you?” He asked.

“RHONDA KNEW!” Nadine screeched incredulously, and yet quietly enough so that it didn’t reach Helga or Mr Simmons. “That bitch didn’t say a word!” She started furiously patting her pockets for her phone. “I will kill that girl—”

“Also, my middle name isn’t Ignatius, who told you—”

“Gossip tree,” Nadine said bluntly, finally finding her phone and opening her message app. “Rhonda I will cut you for not giving me the T, text me immediately.” She muttered each word out as she typed, then growling and tapping furiously. “DAMNIT AUTOCORRECT—”

“Nadine! It’s great to see you!” Helga, not knowing the personal tornado that was currently enveloping Nadine Jones, saw the woman and happily yelled from where she was standing behind the reception desk. Nadine, who could apparently switch moods at the drop of a hat, grinned and gave her a little wave from where she was standing, and only Arnold could see the remnants of annoyance around her eyes.

She turned back to her friend, snarl-whispered, “This isn’t over yet, Shortman!” before she ran up to Helga and squealed while giving the blonde woman a hug.

The receptionist looked sorry for him. “Arnold, sweetie, I’m sorry nobody here appreciates you the way they should,” she said. Arnold looked back, all smiles. It was really nice when someone actually sympathized. “Edna, don’t tell the others, but you’re my favourite around this office,” he whispered.

The receptionist actually blushed and smiled at him, and he grinned a little back. She offered him a small hard candy in return. He liked making people feel happy sometimes with the smallest gestures.

He turned back to the other three, who were now posing for a selfie using Nadine’s camera, making funny, goofy faces. Mr Simmons looked extra gleeful, and Nadine promised to send him the picture so he could get it developed.

“Wonderful!” Mr Simmons declared. “Helga, if it’s not too much trouble, can I get you to autograph something for my wall?”

“I can do you one better,” Helga said proudly. “Do you have a favourite poem or something? I’ll hand write it out, and dedicate the poem just for you.”

Mr Simmons looked like Helga had produced his first-born son, and Helga merely thanked him again for showing her the wall, before giving him a hug and departing. She and Nadine walked over to where Arnold was standing.

“How was the Wall?” Arnold asked. He then realised that Helga had smudged up a bit of her eyeliner and her eyes had looked a little red. “Have you been…crying? Are you okay?”

“Hey, hey!” Helga laughed, looking a little abashed that she had been caught. “Easy. Simmons and
I talked, and we both came out to each other, and we were joking about being gay and we laughed and cried and bonded and shit. It was like an episode of Glee.”

“Oh,” said Arnold, feeling a mix of relief and sadness. He wouldn’t be able to get how much toil it took on someone to come out, but at the very least he hoped that he would be able to make anyone feel safe enough to be that open to him. “That's really quite sweet,” he said. “And that means you have more opportunities to talk to Mr Simmons about things.”

Helga nodded, and then her face fell. “Wait, you knew I was crying?” she asked. “Fuck, it must be my liner, isn’t it?” She started fumbling around her bag. “Criminy, I didn’t even bring a mirror—”

“Me!” Nadine chirped up, and only Arnold could see the canny look she had in her eyes. “I have a mirror! We have a bathroom, and I have a whole bag of products! I don’t have your foundation shade for your undereye…you know what? I have moisturizer!” She grabbed Helga by the arm and dragged her out the office door. “We’ll have her ready and sent back to you in no time, Arnoldo!” she yelled.

Arnold, alarm bells now activated and chiming to the tune of La Cucaracha, was now opening his mouth to protest, but Nadine had dragged her victim out the door and pulled her outside. She did, however, run back to the door, wink, and mouth, “This is what happens when you betray me, loca chocolata, yaya.” before snapping her fingers, and closing the door shut with a click.

Or something like that.

Arnold really wasn’t that good with lip reading.

“Edna, are your friends like this?” he said out loud.

Edna merely gave him a sigh. “Well, Arnold. Girls at that age will always get you down. Here, have a hard candy. That always cheers you up.”

Arnold took one from the bowl Edna offered him happily. At least Edna was nice to him.

Nadine, still holding Helga by the hand, was smirking as she took her upstairs to the staff room, located conveniently by the stairs.

“My makeup bag’s in the staffroom, so come in with me, then we can pick out what you need and we can get on with our lives like nothing major happened.” The woman declared as she opened the staffroom doors. “You okay with vegan makeup or cruelty-free? Cause that’s literally the only stuff I have, and while I like you, Pataki, I won’t be sacrificing no cows or bunnies just for you.”

Helga, walking in behind her, assured her that it was fine. She was friends with socially conscious drag performers, after all. Alyssa had once passed her an eyeliner pen telling her that while things were bigger in Texas, so were animal cruelty cases, and she moved out of the state so that she could get away from that toxic culture and homophobia.

She then proceeded to beat Helga’s face down until Helga looked like she could pass for a twink and put her in for a performance that night, as Alyssa’s own toy boy servants.

Hey, nobody said that the path to social justice was a linear, clear-cut one.
Besides, that was one of the few times Helga managed to rock clear, sharp cheekbones. Only Alyssa Shennel could do that like no other.

“Good,” Nadine said with resolution. She strode towards her table that Helga identified as Nadine’s, (it had a tank and a small white snake in it, basking under a heat lamp), and reached into a makeup pouch packed full with makeup products.

“I have some NYX liner you can use, and maybe even some blush…sorry, I don’t have many white girl products, bless my melanin, but hey you can find something.” She proceeded to pour the contents out on the desk. “Help yourself, please. You look like a whitewalker.”

Helga, grateful, proceeded to sort through what she could use, while Nadine found a makeup mirror she had “liberated” from a colleague and placed it in front of Helga.

”So… I have questions.” Nadine began as Helga found some banana powder and used the sponge to pat the yellow powder under her eyes.

“Sure, go for it.” Helga murmured, distracted. Damn, when did she get such dark eye circles? The crying was a bad idea, her eyeliner was smudged and missing in some places. She could fix it, but it would take some time. Thank goodness for Nadine helping her.

“WEEEELL…” Nadine said, leaning against the table next to hers. “How’ve you been? How’s life? Why are you back? Where are you staying? Can we hang, we should hang. Honestly, I don’t think we’ve actually hung out before, and I feel like we should… we can stay up, talk about hot people, go clubbing or something…”

Helga laughed, nearly patting herself harder with the sponge applicator in the eye. “Slow down, haha! I’m doing… okay. I’m here cause of family business, Arnold offered me a couch to crash-”

“Arnold’s eh?” Nadine’s eyes gleamed. Helga wasn’t sure if she was imagining things, but she noticed that the small white snake had now opened it’s eyes and was staring right at her too. It was very, very similar to Nadine, who was still talking.

“He’s really really nice. I tell people he’s my work-husband, cause only he gets the struggle, teaching here. We’re good friends, and he’s really bad with trusting people sometimes…Did you see Edna downstairs?”

“Yeah, she was looking at me all suspicious and stuff… wait.” Helga paused to look at Nadine. “Is she mean to you too?”

“Holy hell, she’s horrible to everyone except for him, and that’s because he believes in the good of all people or some sort of nonsense like that. And then he charmed her with some… Arnoldo charm. He’s the only one who gets hard candy from her. I don’t know, the man has some sort of clean-cut white boy thing all the old ladies like.”

“Omg.” Helga said, smirking. “You see that too? He’s way too frigging nice!”

“Yes!” Nadine said eagerly, “He once organised a volunteer reading trip to the retirement home for old folks for the 4th and 5th grades, and long story short, the only community volunteer most of them wanted was him. Not even the cute small kid. Just the blonde teacher. Apparently, he was dashing and had a butt the old women pinched a lot. Some kept asking if he could stay back for the sponge
baths. The man looked like he wanted to die. ”

Helga could picture it, a blushing Arnold Shortman trying his best not to get emotionally compromised as old women giggled and strolled by on their walkers, asking if he was available to help them pick stuff up, and then surreptitiously snapping a shot of his butt to share with the other residents. “His stolen virtue.” She said dryly.

“ Exactly!” Nadine said.

They both laughed like old friends.

“In truth though…” Nadine said, trailing off. “ The man’s pure like a maiden of old, and it would be good to find someone that doesn’t take advantage of him like that…”

Helga nodded, now putting down the sponge to grab a black liner pen.

“ I agree.” She said slowly, concentrating on filling in the areas that had disappeared after crying. Waterproof liquid liner was a marketing lie. “ I mean, have you seen him? The man wanted to give up his bed for me when I told him I was coming back to Hillwood.”

“Really?” Nadine said, and Helga could have sworn she saw a gleam in the other woman’s eye reflected in the mirror she was looking in, but she was also concentrating on a clean wing on her liner, she wasn’t actually going to pay attention to possibly misleading information. “ His own bed?”

” Yeah, he’s really too nice!” Helga said, happy that one eye was looking good. She went on to the other eye. “ I refused, of course, it was ridiculous. The man is way too nice. I bet MILFs try and hit on him all the time…..”

“HOLY SHIT, yes.”Nadine’s eyes widened. “PTA meetings, school fetes, field trips, special assemblies, school plays… the last parent-teacher trust exercises were a nightmare…”

Helga stopped short, looking back at Nadine with a half-lined eye. It was rather comical. “Parent-teacher trust exercises? “she repeated, sceptically.

Shrugging, Nadine replied, “Mr Simmons asked for it. Said that teachers and students trusting each other was too common a trope, and wanted parents to trust teachers ‘to guide the children’ or some sort of nonsense. All of us were camped out in the woods, on tree stumps, and then we had to work together as a team to trust each other and solve things. Imagine a 52-year-old man screaming, ‘Fall back, Mrs Garrison! Fall into my arms and we will catch you’ or some sort of shit like that.” She ran her hands over her head. “Arnold had it worst, he was one of two guys in a group with 5 other people and all of them conveniently just trust fell into his arms. He still caught them, every single one.”

“What about the other guy?”

“He wasn’t happy until Arnold agreed to catch him too. He didn’t want to be the only one not allowed to fall into Mr Shortman’s manly arms.”

Helga sucked in a breath, pictured Arnold exasperatedly catching everyone in his group falling from a tree stump, with leaves and twigs in his hair, and laughed, while Nadine joined in. “Of course, everyone falls in love with Arnoldo.” Helga said, rolling her eyes good-naturedly before raising the pen again to her eyelid. “I’ll be honest, anyone who doesn’t snatch him up quick is on the losing
side. He’s such a good man. I would kill to have someone like that.”

Helga couldn’t see Nadine’s reaction again, she was too busy concentrating on the wing on her left eye. “I’ll bet…” Nadine said slowly, “It’s cause some people don’t know it yet…or are in serious denial…or are really really oblivious… The man wears his heart on his argyle sweater sleeve, and it’s really kinda obvious when he has emotions for someone.”

Helga snorted. “I will bet on that.” She capped the liner pen and blinked to see if the wings on her eyelids were level and equal. They both looked fine. She continued, looking at her appearance and trying to figure out if something was missing. “If he’s your work husband, shouldn’t you be dating him in real life or something? I’m surprised you haven’t married him yet. Gerald mentions that you propose to him sometimes…”

 Silence. Helga turned to look back at Nadine and was met with a dazed Nadine staring back at her.

“ You mean... me? And White Boy?” Nadine said, moving her hands around in gestures. Then she started cackling. The snake in the tank was making head gestures similar to Nadine laughing. Helga was confused, of course.

“ Okay okay, time out, Helga P.” Nadine said. “ You thought I had a thing for ARNOLD? “

“ Well, doesn’t he? “ Helga said. “ I honestly thought he had a thing for you, judging by how much time you guys spend together... you guys even spent New Year’s together-“

“I hosted a party, he came!” Nadine said, looking horrified. “ I’m engaged to someone else- HIS HEAD LOOKS LIKE A FOOTBALL.”

“ Hey hey, footballs aren’t always bad a shape you know.” Helga chided. She hesitated but decided that it had been ages, Nadine had never knew her secret, so what the hell. “ I had a crush on someone with a similar head shape once.” She said. “Goofy sort of fellow. Cute guy. However, I was angry, he never knew, badabing badaboom, we never did anything about it.”

Nadine tilted her head, studying her. The snake in the tank mirrored her movements. “Huh.” she murmured.

Helga looked back at her, a little nervously. “What?” she asked. Did she mess up her liner already or something?

Nadine opened her mouth before she closed it and reached over to open the makeup bag, drawing a tube of lipstick out. “You need some colour. You look like you about to be dead, and I’ve seen you, you always wear something bold before you do anything…why are you here again?”

” I’m…giving a talk to Arnold’s class-”

“ Oh for his English class! Right.” Nadine pushed the liquid lipstick tube towards her. “You need this. Where Arnold’s class is concerned, there dwelleth monsters, and only one man knows how to handle them. What you want is courage. This colour works very well for that.”

” HahaHA, Nadine.” Helga rolled her eyes. “They’re 10-year-old kids. What could possibly go wrong?”

Nadine looked over at the white snake in the tank, and both of them gave Helga a look of worry.
Arnold was trying his best not to peer through the windows like a schoolboy who had been reprimanded and punished by his teachers. That failed as students walked by, curious on why the nicest teacher in the school looked like he was about to meet his doom.

“Erm, Mr Shortman? You okay there?” A girl asked tentatively as she saw her teacher peering through the glass window of the doors. “You can just walk in, you know.”

“Frida, I’m fine, don’t worry about it.” Arnold said, looking down at her concerned face with a reassuring smile.

“So what are you doing if you haven’t forgotten your pass to get into the staffroom?” she asked.

“Well…”

Thank god Helga and Nadine were finally getting up from Nadine’s desk and walking towards the staff room doors where Arnold was.

Oh shit, Helga and Nadine were actually getting up from Nadine’s desk and walking towards the staff room doors where Arnold was!

Arnold, panicking, decided to do what he did best: Pretend he was being casual. He flipped himself off the door, so he was no longer facing it, and pretended to take his phone out to casually poke at it as though he were texting someone. And stayed that way until Nadine and Helga pushed the door open and found him there.

He then made a whole scene of pretending to realise that the two women were there, and going, “Oh hey, you guys took your time!” in a very casual voice.

This meant that he may have accidentally squeaked.

Frida didn’t look super impressed.

Neither did the two other women.

“Erm…you okay, Football Head?” Helga asked tentatively.

Nadine started snickering, as though she was privy to a secret that only she knew.

Which was a total lie.

Arnold was mentally glaring at her now.

“Mr Shortman… I think I’m gonna go now…”Frida said, slowly backing away from the scene like a man backing away from a spitting, angry cat.

Arnold let her. When a 7 year old was acting suspicious of a teacher, he was probably never going to get their trust back.

“Shall we?”Helga asked, watching the little girl move away, a look of concern on her face.

“Yeah…”Arnold muttered. “Sure…class, yes. Helga, it’s where Mr Simmons’ old classroom is…”
Helga bobbed her head in understanding, but then stopped short. “Ah, no. Guys, I left my phone in Mr Simmons’ office. You guys go ahead, I’ll see you guys there!” With that, she sped off before Arnold could say anything else.

“Girl’s a go-getter, that’s for sure.” Nadine said, as the two of them decided to proceed to their classrooms together. “I like her. She runs into things head long.”

As they both walked, Arnold decided to bite the bullet and ask, “What the hell did you talk to her about?”

Nadine cocked her head in confusion. “Fascinating convo. I told her that you were a MILF Magnet-“

“What.”

“Yeah, and that you were a sugar baby for old women in the old folks home-“

“You told her- why would you…”

“And that you had the heart of a maiden and was searching for the right person to take your virtue away.”

“You’re banned from talking to her from now.”

“A few things though.” Nadine continued as though she didn’t hear Arnold. “She thinks you and I have a thing…”

“At this point, I wouldn’t be surprised if everyone did.” Arnold muttered. “This means something. We should stop being friends-“

“As if you can get rid of me that easily,” Nadine scoffed. “She also thinks you’re a catch, and ‘she would kill to have someone like you.’”

“I’m someone like me!” Arnold protested.

“Yeah… She told me she had a crush on someone with a similar head shape to yours back in the day, goofy, kinda cute.” Nadine gave Arnold a side-glance. “Know anyone like that?”

Arnold stopped and stared at her, Nadine stopped and waited patiently.

“Oh.” Arnold said.

“Yeah….” Nadine nodded wisely.

“I mean… Arnie’s famous now, she might still have a chance with him.”

Nadine stared at him.

“What? It makes sense. He liked her and everything! Who else has a similar head shape?”

“You two deserve each other.” Nadine muttered as she walked off to her classroom a room ahead.

Helga strode past the dour-faced receptionist and knocked on Mr Simmon’s door. The small
singsongy, “Come in!” gave Helga confidence to stride in.

“Hey Mr Simmons.” she greeted. “Me again… I think I left my phone…”

She trailed off. Behind Mr Simmons, a few feet away from the window, she could see the concrete ground where she had spent a lot of her recesses at, and behind the fence was a small girl, holding a pair of binoculars and peering into the school. The girl didn’t see Helga at first. She was wearing a blazer on top of a uniform that Helga found familiar. And when the girl’s binoculars gaze settled on Helga looking right back at her from the office window, she pulled off the binoculars, revealing a blonde girl with hair back in a messy ponytail looking panicked. She scarpered off before Helga could say anything.

Mr Simmons, who hadn’t noticed what Helga was looking at, went, “Hmm?” as he smiled at the blonde woman.

“Right…” Helga murmured. “Phone.” She did a quick cursory glance around the room before she found what she was looking for, grabbed it and yelled, “Found my phone, thanks! “before running out the door.

She stopped as she left the school admin office, eyes wide and confused. She ran out the school doors to the spot Mr Simmons’ office window looked out at. She scanned the horizons and looked for possible hiding spots the girl could be in.

Nothing.

She went back into the school building slowly, just as the school bell started ringing, signalling that the first class was about to start. Clutching at her phone, she began to review the facts of what she saw in her head as she walked back to old Mr Simmons’ classroom, where Arnold was waiting for her.

The uniform the girl was wearing was the exact uniform Olga’s kids had on in the photos Rhonda showed her.

And if she was correct, with the passing glance she saw her face, Helga was positive that the girl spying into the school was Ophelia Pataki-Johnson. Her niece.

Niece. That word just sounded so weird coming from her.

Helga had nieces. And a nephew.

Helga had a niece who was apparently a stalker. Or conducting surveillance on something in this school. Just like she did at age 9.

Somewhere out there a deity was plotting this out and laughing right at her face.
Helga rushed into Mr Simmon’s old classroom, trying her best to hide her emotions from possibly meeting a family member outside of Olga and Big Bob.

Judging from Arnold’s look on his face, she wasn’t hiding that very well.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” He asked.

She shook her head, and muttered, “I'll tell you later. Long story.”

She wished she had time to look over herself to see if she looked fine. She was pretty sure she had sweatstains on her shirt, despite the fact that it was cold in February. All the running was definitely not a good idea. She also thought that her chunky heeled boots were maybe not a great idea for running in.

The class had been noisy when Arnold was there, chattering up a storm. When Helga walked in though, the class had quietened down to a low roar, having noticed a new adult entering the class. Only Jayden gave a shriek of joy, and a few students had a look of slowly recognising the flustered new woman who had entered the room only a few minutes before.

“ Oh my god…”

“ That’s her isn’t it?”

“ It is! It’s Helga G Pataki!”

Arnold cleared his throat and started trying to get attention from his wayward class who were now getting excited at the idea of a famous author being in the same class as they were.

Meanwhile, Helga tried to look at the direction of the source of voices all around the classroom and was immediately struck by how much and how little it resembled the classroom of yore.

The tables had been replaced, for one thing. They were still tables you could raise up to reveal a great cubby hole for books and other things, but these were newer, and made of a lighter material than the wooden table top of the past. Certainly, they were new, Helga doubted that a public school like PS 118, underfunded as it was, would go on for 20 years using the same tables again and again. They lacked the engravings and graffiti from bored youthful hands. Helga was very sure that in her day she had once written a paragraph that spoke admiringly of Arnold’s nimble fingers on her own table top.

She had to erase it later using water and a lot of rubbing against the table surface to get the ink out, but even then the indent of her handwriting still remained.

These kids were either less inclined to vandalise school property or they had other places for that outlet.

The walls had also been repainted at some point, and it wasn’t the same hue that it had been years
ago, a faded sea like hue that couldn’t hold a candle to the intense blue that was the classroom walls now. There was definitely no more pencil sharpening area, a small corner of the classroom was now a designated book corner, as the block letters above the small bookcase cheerfully announced. The back of the class had cubby holes for students to put their bags in, each labelled carefully with their own names.

Above it was a bulletin board that filled with paintings, world maps, and a few photos of Arnold with the class. It was so alien and yet so familiar that Helga nearly wanted to let the experience wash over her, to forget that she was so much older now.

She blinked and everything snapped back into focus. She was no longer 9, but 29, and she was no longer sitting at the back of the class throwing spitballs at an unsuspecting Arnold Shortman. She was now someone that was supposed to help mould these young minds into future leaders. Was this how Arnold felt?

At this point Helga turned to have a look at the man in question, who was still talking to the class, apparently giving them instructions on the writing workshop they were having that day, and the kids were both listening and taking out notebooks to jot down notes. Did kids still use notebooks now? She was under the impression kids were all about technology and computers and smartphones these days.

She wondered if her niece, who she remembered was 9 and the same age as the kids in this classroom, was technology inclined as well.

She wondered who her niece was spying on in PS 118, especially if she had skipped school to do so. When Helga used to be a bit obsessed with Arnold, she never had to skip school in order to spy on him, which at the time was a godsend to her. She wondered if the person her niece was spying on was a crush too, like how Arnold was for her.

Said man had stopped speaking at this point and Helga took a few very long seconds to realise that was because he was waiting for her to say something, probably to introduce herself and all that. She shook herself mentally out of her thought process and smiled winningly at the class. "Hi, kids, I’m Ms Pataki-"

She winced as she did so. She really hated the idea of using the title Ms, but she wasn’t sure how formal Arnold was in class, and figured it was better to be safe. “You may remember me from such book series as ‘Our Gang!’ and ‘Umbrella Girl’ -”

Damn, she was also apparently using catchphrases from old TV cartoon series that the kids probably had never watched before…Ah well, at least they were paying attention to her.

“I’ve been writing near all my life, and to be honest, I’m not as good as I am now. To prove that, I have brought a couple of my 4th-grade poems to read out, so you can laugh at how bad they were back then.” She whipped out her phone, making a face as she did so, and a couple of kids at the front row laughed.

As Helga read the poems, she was mindful of the muse of most of her old poems, now casually leaning back, arms folded. He had an unreadable expression on his face, a half -lidded gaze that would fool one into believing he was dreaming away. It was a good look on him, she thought. He often looked like that, back in the day when she used to spy on him from across this very room, and she was pretty sure he never paid attention during certain class subjects, especially during Science and Geography.
Then again, she was one to talk, was she? Making a near fool of herself as she concentrated on trying everything in the book to get his attention back then, only to act like she didn’t care when he did react. It was a very silly thing to do. Other silly things included writing poetry at age 9, and taking herself super seriously because of it. While she was grateful that she had managed to figure out what she wanted to do with her life at age 8, she was also not very sensible back then, often writing love poetry with so much mush, complete with ludicrous vocabulary. At the time she thought she had sounded sophisticated and intellectual, but the benefit of hindsight meant the old poems made her cringe with shame.

On the plus side, she had cannibalised some of the decent parts, and had used them in one of her books.

She ended both poems, to the reception of a very unimpressed class. “So, I’m guessing you’re all wondering why I picked two really rather crappy poems-”

“No, poems are just stupid, Ms Pants- tacky.” Someone yelled from the back, and the whole class burst into laughter, save for the 4-6 kids who were clearly fans of Helga. Jayden in particular looked horrified. She could see Arnold out of the corner of her eye wincing.

Helga quickly identified the heckler as a big, round boy who wore red and white stripes and, for some reason, a Jughead-esque hat. He looked so ridiculous and yet faintly reminiscent of another big bruiser she knew back then that she merely smiled at him. Old Helga Pataki would have threatened to beat him up.

Current Helga just gave him a look, folded her arms and said, “Hm. Perhaps. You think you can do better? Prove me wrong…erm…”

“Hamish.” Arnold supplied helpfully.

“Yes, Hamish. You think you can do better? I challenge you to write a better poem than I can, in your writing assignment. If you can do so, and impress me, I’ll give you 10 bucks.” She said.

The boy looked a little taken aback at that, but he swallowed his fear and yelled, “You’re on, Ms Pants!”

“Good kid.” she shot back. “Poems can be stupid to some people, but there’s a reason why so many people love them. It’s shorter than prose, you can use disjointed language to express your feelings, and the sentence structure doesn’t have to make sense for you to understand.”

She pocketed her phone. “The reason why I read those two particular poems is easy. At this stage, most of you are writing things because of school and that seems like a drag. The first draft of these two poems were written when I was forced to do so, for a really bad English class assignment that didn’t have a nice teacher like the one you guys have.” (She didn’t need to turn around to know that Arnold was blushing again. That guy blushed really easily.)

“She gave me a really high mark,” she continued, “But I was never satisfied since it was obvious I just threw a bunch of wordy words in and called it a day. I got really annoyed, thought back again, and rewrote them, this time with more meaning, more thought process and more effort.”

She also, on that day had a really kinda sweet encounter with Arnold, who said something that had inspired her and made her decide to rewrite the poems again, and resubmit them to the teacher.
“The teacher still gave me a high mark, but this time, I was happier with what I did. Now, when I look back on these poems, I see that they were kinda bad in comparison to the work I do now. But I’m happy with these because it showed that I was willing to improve.”

She looked at the class. “Writing is all about that. You can submit something and get a good grade but that doesn’t mean that it had heart or it was true. You can go back to your older works and go, ‘Hm, this was bad, but maybe I can try again!’ and it could work, because now you have time to think about it and remember what went wrong. And you should, if possible, never be afraid of writing your feelings on paper, because feelings may seem stupid, but when you get it out on paper you’ll feel better. If it sucks, tear it up, do better again, just keep doing it.”

The kids listened to what she said, a little more convinced now. Arnold gave an approving nod and took over.

“Thank you, Ms Pataki!” He said, smilingly. “Now, as you remember, your writing assignments were about Urban Legends-“

Helga raised an eyebrow at him, and Arnold, who had caught her eye, laughed nervously and continued.

“- And as I mentioned, you have to make up your own stories, come up with a good skeleton of a storyline and show me the first bit by the end of this week. You’re allowed to ask me, or Ms Pataki here any questions regarding this. Don’t be shy asking her anything-“

At this, a hand raised up and wriggled about enthusiastically, looking pained at trying to stay quiet until Arnold called on him. “Yes, Theophilius?”

The owner of the arm, a small black kid wearing a Rick and Morty shirt (Was that even suitable for 4th Graders? Helga thought.) asked, in an entirely too innocent voice, “Ms Pataki? Are you and Mr Shortman dating?”

Helga, who was expecting some sort of weirdly intrusive question, smiled. Arnold, on the other hand, was currently choking on air.

“Me?” Helga said, in a really great mirror of Theophilius’s own tone, looking thoughtful. “I thought he was dating the 5th Grade teacher, Ms Jones-“

As the class erupted into chaos again, Arnold had given Helga a small glare before he had to yell at the class to settle down. Helga smirked.

That was pretty good for her first class talk!

“So…aside from you trying to derail my class with fake news-”

“I call them, ‘alternate facts’, Mr Shortman, sir,” Helga said airily.

The two of them were standing in an empty classroom, while the children had been dismissed and out to play during recess. Helga was facing Arnold, with a teasing smile on her lips. “Besides, the kids were lovely, I honestly don’t understand why you and Nadine and that white snake thingy were
so worried about-

"Peaches is in school today?" Arnold said, looking a little taken aback.

"Her name is Peaches?" Helga asked. She mulled over the name for a second before she nodded approvingly. "It's a great name for her, I approve-"

Arnold slumped where he was sitting, on his desk, his legs dangling off the ground. "Everyone betray me, I fed up with this world-

"You remembered the quotes from The Room!" Helga said, delighted.

"Gerald started watching it and he forced me to sit with him when he did, so he could get company while watching it." Arnold mumbled.

"I'm so proud of you two fluffernubbets." Helga cackled.

"Aside from you trying to derail my class," Arnold repeated exasperatedly, "The class did surprisingly well. And they seemed to like you a lot-"

"Psh, I'm easy to like," Helga replied loftily, though her eyes were soft. She genuinely did like Arnold's kids. Little Gracie Wong reminded her a lot of Phoebe. Hamish was actually pretty funny, judging by his story outline that he asked Helga brusquely to look over, his little beady eyes holding a little hope that Helga would approve.

His story outline, along with the rest of his classmates' were in a small pile on Arnold's desk, and she approached the desk, flipping through Hamish's story outline. She thought he had a very creative approach to the assignment, and she had given him a few pointers to work with, which the boy took, pretending to be sullenly but looking a little excited.

She frowned when something struck her, as she saw the name of the student under Hamish Holdenberg. "Erm, Arnold, out of curiosity…that weird kid-"

"Helga, none of the kids are weird. If any of them happen to be quirky, they're just trying to express themselves in multitudes of ways-" Arnold began.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." Helga waved a hand. "I was saying. That weird kid-"

"…I'm taking you mean Freddy-"

"Yeah, Freddy Krueger-"

"Coogler, Helga-"

"Krueger is more accurate judging by that story outline he showed me!" Helga shot back. She grabbed the story outline Freddy had written and waved it around. "The Pig Man of Huckleberry Street? Do you know how many nights I would have to stay up to get that story out of my head?"

"It didn't seem that bad-" Arnold weakly protested. "I've heard worse-"

She flipped to a random page, "He finds grotty little children who are stank-ass nasty and corners them, and when the kids are found, they lie dead, grotesque pig masks on their faces, dripping bacon fat all over the ground-" Helga read out loud incredulously. "You sure this is, 'Not that bad'?"

"To be fair, he once did a class presentation on Frankenstein and how Mary Shelley was woefully
treated by history…” Arnold offered weakly. “So he has an interest in the macabre. It really could be worse. He’s just really curious, and I’m not going to shut the door on his curiosity journey…”

Helga snorted. “Yeah, sure, Arnold.” She picked up the story outlines. “So, as a teacher/workshop holder, I will look through all these storylines and give good, constructive feedback for these kiddies…”

Arnold nodded, looking a little anxious. “Can you handle it though?” he asked. “You haven’t done this before-”

“Pleeeeeease.” Helga waved her hand. “I work with kids all the time. I’m the designated babysitter for the kids of Eugene’s drag performer friends, and I help them with their homework, and they love me and shit. It’s amazing how much kids love me. I should be a teacher one day.”

”Whatever you say, Helga.” Arnold said, rolling his eyes with exasperated fondness.

Helga considered that a win. Anyone who got Arnold to roll his eyes like that was probably earthshatteringly amazing, aka her.

She walked out of the school grounds at around 11, carrying the bag of papers she wanted to go through. Arnold had to work on other things for the rest of the day, and she figured that finding a nice quiet place to mark them would be a great idea. Arnold offered her a seat at the back of the class, but she refused, saying that she was in the mood for a banana muffin and a mocha of some sort.

In all honesty, being in the school in the same classroom with Arnold was bringing back loads of old memories, the times she spent laughing with Phoebe over books in the library, the spitballs she spat at Arnold’s big oval head, building forts and playing Capture the Flag. She was also developing this really weird habit where she and Arnold would look over at each other and smile once in awhile. It was really really weird.

In any case, she was out right now, standing on the school grounds looking for cafes nearby on her phone, lazily looking around when she heard something small but definite.

She froze, then turned to look around.

Nothing.

She would have let that moment go if it were not for the fact that she saw a few green leaves falling down from a tree nearby the school grounds. Curious, she walked over to have a look, making sure that she made her steps seem as quiet as possible in case it was a harmless squirrel. She liked squirrels sometimes. They were so not like rats.

But rats could also climb trees. She had to force herself not to shudder at that.

As she approached, she realized that whatever was up there was bigger than a squirrel. In fact, she could safely say that it was less a whatever and more of a whoever. Someone small was on the tree and was currently grumbling.

“Darn it, darn it, darn it!” the voice was muttering. Judging by the pitch and the cadence, despite the fact they were growling, it was a little girl. “I should have packed sandwiches, or at least BOUGHT sandwiches…what is the point of being rich and getting a really great allowance if I don’t buy stuff with it? I’ll kill Odie for distracting me today if this mission fails-”
 Somehow, despite her running off the first time, Ophelia Pataki-Johnson was now in her cross-paths again. Helga had to wonder if fate was playing a trick on her.

And even then, the little blonde girl didn’t notice that Helga was now underneath the tree she was currently camping on, which gave Helga a chance to see what she was doing. The girl was sitting on a sturdy tree branch, eyes currently looking through her binoculars while her hands were searching through a purple knapsack.

“Eurgh, I should have taken notes on the school exits and entrances waaaaaay earlier than this. This is embarrassing, I should redo this, I need a map, for Christ’s sake-”

She still didn’t notice Helga underneath the tree. Helga, who was currently looking rather bemused, decided that she had to say something, otherwise the little girl would run off again.

“Security in PS 118 really that bad, huh?” Helga said out loud, directing it upwards towards the girl in the tree.

The little girl shrieked, nearly falling off the tree as she did so, and dropped the binoculars she was holding, falling onto the grass under the tree with a small thud. “Don’t sneak up on me!” the girl yelled. “Haven’t you heard of stranger danger? That’s …that’s totally illegal in this state! My uncle’s a lawyer, he’ll have your butt on this!”

Someday, little Ophelia would understand that Helga G Pataki really didn’t get intimidated by people very much, especially not by little 9-year-old girls with a few twigs in her hair, and a dirty school uniform and blazer.

Today was not that day.

“Says the one wearing a school uniform, clearly showing that you’re not from around these parts, little girlie.” Helga drily intoned. She picked up the binoculars and turned them over. They were old, and oddly familiar, and etched on the side was a small B.B.P. The kid had clearly gone through Big Bob’s Vietnam War collection. “If anyone’s calling for stranger danger, it should be me.”

“I …I have a right to be here!” the little girl shrieked.

“Sure you do, Little Miss Muffettpants.” Helga nodded understandingly, throwing in a stern tone. That, she learnt from theatre. She turned the binoculars around her hand.“It will be interesting to hear what you have to say down at the precinct, especially considering this clearly stolen artefact…”

She heard the little girl swallow hard and Helga had to bite back a chuckle. “Precinct?” Ophelia repeated. “I …I can’t go to the police station! Oh my god, you’re a cop! Pop Pop’s gonna freak! Darn darn darn, mom’s gonna cry-”

Ophelia’s mention of her mother and father gave Helga pause. Obviously, she wasn’t actually going to haul the little girl to a police station, she just wanted to mess with her a little. However, Olga clearly mattered a lot to this kid, in some way. And the kid clearly adored Big Bob Pataki, or liked him enough to call him Pop Pop. She wanted to know why. This could be a great way to learn more about Olga and her family, and maybe even bond with the kid a little. Maybe the kid, in her oblique way, knew something Helga could use.

She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t realise that Ophelia was still crying. “-This is all Odie’s fault! Officer, please don’t take me there, I promise I’ll tell you everything, I’ll leave! JUST DON’T ARREST ME!”
Helga now felt that she might have been a little too mean to the girl, and felt kinda bad for her. “Kid, get down from that tree. You and I need a talk. I’m not a cop, but I want answers. I promise I won’t rat you out to the feds, or even your mom, I just want to talk.”

The kid still looked a little mullish, and didn’t seem to want to get down from the tree. Helga sighed. “I’m on my way to a cafe, kid.” she said. For most of the encounter, she had been leaning against the tree, and now she pushed herself off, looking back up to where Ophelia was sitting. “Get down from there, and you have a chance to score a free meal from someone you don’t know. You might even get pancakes.” Helga bent down to leave the binoculars on the grassy landing, clearly, where Ophelia could see her. Holding her hands up, she backed away from the tree.

She was around a few feet away from that point when she heard a small thud, and knew without turning around that the little girl had landed neatly on the ground. A few more rustling sounds, and the little girl was now yelling, “Wait!”

Helga turned around to properly look at the small girl running towards her. The blonde girl was flustered, but her chin was set and her eyes were a bullet grey blue.

“I’ll talk.” she murmured. “And I want bananas on my pancakes. You’re buying.”

Ophelia Pataki-Johnson was, in sense of the word, a Pataki, through and through.

That was the only thing Helga could think of as she and Ophelia sat opposite each other across the hole-in- the wall diner she and Arnold were at yesterday for breakfast. Despite the fact that it was not breakfast time anymore, Mrs Banks had seen Helga coming in with Ophelia, and offered to make Helga her usual, and the little girl anything she wanted.

She thanked Mrs Banks for taking their order, and when the kindly proprietor asked who the little girl was, it wasn’t hard to say, “My niece.” to her.

It felt a little weird, saying those words out loud. It didn’t matter that they were true. She just wasn’t used to being anyone’s blood auntie in any way.

”Hmph.” Ophelia said from across the table, her eyes studying Helga. “Good lie. It helps we kinda have the same colouring.”

It was funny, lying with the truth.

”Yeah.” Helga managed to force out. “Good thing.” The one good thing about not ever keeping in touch with Olga was the fact that the kids clearly didn’t know who she was, and it would be easier to shake them down for information.

She looked at little Ophelia. When she first saw her, down from the tree, what struck her was the scowl the little girl had, so similar to her own when she was a child, and Big Bob’s. She clearly had delicate features, that was probably from the Johnsons, and her hair was a darker blonde. However, two things stuck out: eyes were a sharp, dagger-like grey-blue that were piercing, and she had a small unibrow going on.

It wasn’t super obvious, of course, but it made Helga laugh a little. A little Pataki that was stalking something in PS118. The 90s clearly made a comeback and rebooted Helga G Pataki somehow.

The two were both silent.
"So, it wouldn’t hurt to at least exchange names, kiddo.” Helga said slowly. It was the easiest way to start.

"I’m not telling you my real name!” Ophelia said, scandalised. “You’re still a stranger to me! You could be selling me to human traffickers and I could be a kid slave in some country!”

"One, offensive,” Helga replied. “Two, you’re nine. Why would I want a kid slave? Child labour is waaaaay too overrated, you kids drop things a lot. Three, you’re letting me buy you pancakes, and you clearly want to EAT the pancakes, thus showing you clearly don’t worry about getting drugged and getting kidnapped by me. Real names are the last thing we should be worried about. Come on. First names only.”

The girl couldn’t argue with the logic, so she sighed. “The name’s Ophelia.”

"Helga.” The older woman replied. “Ophelia’s a pretty sweet name.”

"Eurghhhhh.” The girl grumbled. “Ophelia is so stuuuuupid. It’s such a girly name. I wish mom named me something else.” She frowned. “Also, what kind of name is Helga anyway? Sounds like an old lady’s name.”

Helga scrunched up her face and made a gesture that meant, ‘Yeah you might have a point there.’ Only old European women who looked like they milked cows for a living were called Helga. She had always resented that name when she was younger.

Not to mention the heartbreak when she looked up her name and found that it was basically another iteration of the name, “Olga”.

"Well, yeah, if it were up to me, I would be named something nicer,” she said benignly. “Like … Cecile. Or Lila.”


“They probably are.” Helga said. “But it’s nicer than Helga.”

The girl snorted. “Got that right there, missy.”

Mrs Banks had returned to their table laden with plates of food, including Ophelia’s Banana Pancakes. Setting them both on the table, she smiled at the two of them. “Getting some family bonding time?” She said kindly.

“Like never before!” Ophelia smiled toothily. Mrs Banks chuckled and Helga did too, albeit weakly.

Once Mrs Banks left, Ophelia’s smile disappeared. “I have to do all the lying around here,” she grumbled as she started cutting up her stack of pancakes.

Helga tilted her head. “Hey, I’m buying you food here, you can afford to lie and tell me about what you were doing up a tree in PS 118.”

The girl rolled her eyes, a move so reminiscent of Helga’s own she had to remind herself she was not looking at a mirror of her 9-year-old self.

"If you must know,” she said flatly. “I was conducting surveillance for the protection of someone.”

Helga raised a brow. She knew that sort of defensive double-speak, she was very fluent in it, starting
from the age of 5. “Uh…huh.”

The girl, who clearly thought that Helga was buying her story, continued, a bit more confident. “The kid, he’s in total danger. I need to help him- that is, SAVE HIM. From the destructive forces at work.”

"Right,” Helga said slowly. “The only way you can protect this kid is if only you do it…”

“Yes!” Ophelia blurted out, then blushed a little when she realised she had said it a little more louder than she had intended. She lowered her voice, “The kid…he’s in a lot of danger…and he’s clearly not taking care of himself, and getting mistreated. I have to help him and show him messages that he will be saved soon. Only I can do it.”

Helga played along, “Right, sure, only you could do it.”

Ophelia smiled, in apparent relief that Helga was clearly buying every bit of her really true story, and said,”Yeah, and it has to be soon, cause the day of reckoning is upon us…”

Helga, bobbing her head in understanding, mulled over what Ophelia said. “So the day of reckoning…I think that’s tomorrow, Feb 14th, isn’t it? You need to show him a message to get him to escape from danger.”

Ophelia nodded eagerly.

Helga tilted her head.

“Well, I liked the story,” she said. “8/10 for being really creative, you actually managed to keep me going. If it weren’t for the fact that what you just said was a total lie, I would have asked you to give me the rights to the story.”

The look Ophelia gave her, shellshocked, across the table, made Helga smirk a little in her tea. “How did you-

“Magic.” Helga said drily. “Also, you showed your work way too much. I liked the whole lying with the truth bit you did, by the way, very good to get out of lie detectors, but you’re dealing with a master. I’ll show you how to do it better but in the meantime…I just want a name.”

Ophelia looked like she was struggling a little, torn between revealing what Helga wanted and preserving a secret. She ended up folding her arms across her chest. “Well, if you’re so smart, you tell me what I’m hiding then.”

Helga smirked. “I’ve been down that road before, kid. I’m not gonna force you to tell me your feelings about some podunk boy, you don’t have to. However, I’m only here cause I want to help. You’re doing pretty good, but you want something in PS 118. I know the ins and out of this place, the secure exits and secret entrances. I have people on the inside. You’re not from around here, so I don’t think you know how to do it. I can help you.”

"I don’t believe you-"

“ I haven’t ratted you out yet, Ophelia. And honestly, I won’t. You have my word. Also, you owe me a name. I ask only for that much.”

The little girl, finally defeated, threw her hands up in the air. “Fine! Fine! Do you want to know
who I want to talk to? It’s this cute guy in the 4th grade, okay?”


“He’s just funny, and really really smart, and he says the coolest things, and he’s kinda pretty, and he knows all about Frankenstein’s monster—”

Wait what.

“And he knows so much about spooky stories, and he’s not mushy, and his hair is really shiny!”

Oh gods no.

Helga went into her bag, and pulled out the first stapled set of papers and pushed it towards Ophelia. “This your card?” she said, half hoping she was wrong.

Ophelia took a look down at the name, and she looked back at Helga more suspiciously than before. “You know him?” she said.

Ye gods no.

“I believe I do.” Helga said, with a sigh.

Ophelia leaned back against the booth. “Hmph. If you do know him…perhaps there is a way you can help me.”

Helga wanted to cry.

Why oh why did her niece, her mini-me in some aspects, have a crush on Freddy Coogler, the weirdo kid of the 4th grade?!

Chapter End Notes

I haven't realised I haven't thanked so many people. Arrku and the rest of the people from my Discord Server so far who have bee REALLY helping me with this story, like the names of Olga's kids, certain plot elements, and just telling me I can do things. I love you all.

I should write in these more often.
Despite the fact that her Mini-Me was probably a masochist who clearly had issues, she was pretty sure that once she found out Ophelia’s reasoning for her crush, it would make things easier for her to support her niece. Family was family, after all, and the kid was 9. Helga felt that rejecting or downright disapproving of a 9-year-old’s choices was just not a great way for any adult to behave.

However, it was hard.

Very, very hard.

“So…tell me WHY you like Freddy-“

“Nope.”

“Come on, if I’m the sensible adult who has to help you-”

“No.”

“Kid.”

“Stranger.”

Helga sighed. If this was how she was like at age 9, she was really surprised that people were still willing to deal with her.

She decided to try another tactic: task orientation.

“Fine, don’t tell me. At the very least, show me your work.”

The stubborn nine-year-old looked up. “Excuse me?” she asked, looking momentarily thrown off.

“Show me what you’ve got so far.” Helga said, leaning back and crossing her arms. “I want to know what and where you’ve covered. If I’m helping you in this, you need to show me what you’ve done and what you haven’t.”

Ophelia rolled her eyes, a move Helga found familiar. “Eurgh, fine.” She reached into her bag and drew out a Google maps print out of the school, as well as building proofs and neat notes annotated all around. Helga was impressed. She was never this organised.

However…
“Don’t they have phones for this?” She asked, puzzled, as she looked over the aerial and frontal view of the PS 118 school grounds on Ophelia’s maps.

“I got grounded a few weeks ago, so Mom and Dad took away my phone as a result.” Ophelia rolled her eyes. “I had to live like a plebeian, can you believe it? I can’t get on Instagram anymore, my social media stalking is cut by like…65%, and I can’t print anything using my iPad, so I have to use a laptop like I’m OLD.”

Dear lord, she wasn’t a mini Helga. She was a mini- Rhonda Wellington Lloyd Slash Helga mix. And Pedigree Johnson to boot.

“Ah, to be young and spoiled as fu- hell.” Helga quickly corrected herself when she remembered that she was in the presence of a 9-year-old.

"Hey, hey, you’re helping me, don’t get all salty on me just cause you didn’t get my family-"

“ If only you knew, tiny one,” Helga muttered.

“ Sides, you get your own choices and destiny, you’re probably one of those liberals Pop Pop’s always yakking on about-”

Sometimes Helga would begrudgingly admit that Big Bob had taught her good basic principles, such as questioning authority, always sticking to your ideals, and always keeping alert. Sometimes Helga mostly wanted to slap herself for having shitty, rather selfish and hurtful views that she had learned from the feet of her Father and hoped that no one else would have learnt from him. Ophelia was a sign she was going to be proven wrong.

“ I’m sure your Pop Pop is a lovely, lovely man and no one has ever defied him,” Helga said drily.

“ Well, duh!” the girl retorted. “Pop Pop’s said that only two people have never listened to him: one was grandma Miri, and the other he won’t talk about, just that she was a no-good beatnik. He gets angry and sad for some reason.”

Helga mentally chortled at the fact that her father now referred to her as a beatnik, at the same time refusing to consider her other feelings on this matter. She decided to change the subject. “ So…your plans, kid.”

Ophelia rolled her eyes and started making a quick speech on what she had done in the past, pointing a finger at the maps with quick, clinical taps. Helga had to marvel at this kid. She clearly knew what she did, made notes, and recorded every single failure she had ever done, including the failed recon sessions and the failed attempts to talk to Freddy. It was obvious the girl did her homework.

Wait...

“ That is a lot of time dedicated to stalking this kid,” Helga said slowly. “ Have you actually been doing your homework?”

“Please, I’m top of my class. Also, you’re not my mom, don’t tell me what to do.”

Again, Helga had to bite back a chuckle. “ Look, I’m a fuddy-duddy sort, let me worry on a few aspects on looking after a child for a few moments.” She said dryly. She was pretty sure she just channelled Arnold for a few minutes there.

Maybe she was hanging out with him too much, he was clearly trying to be a good influence on her again.
Looking back at the maps, she frowned, “I like the recon, but you still haven’t explained what you’re planning to do.”

Ophelia rolled her eyes, “Good Lord, must I explain everything?” She grumbled. “I need a way to sneak something in -”

“Yeah, not buying it unless you tell me what the something is.” Helga said flatly. “This is 2018, school laws state that I can’t bring in anything suspicious from people outside the school, or even inside the school, for that matter. I’m newish and I barely qualify, I’m only here cause I’ve got connections. If you want me to participate, I want to see what you want to bring inside the school so that I can be assured you’re not being a terrorist.”

Helga was bluffing, of course. She was actually just curious what Ophelia wanted to do, considering that it was Valentine’s Day and it was obvious she wanted to do something sweet for Freddy. What would you give a twisted child you had a crush on?

She couldn’t tell if Ophelia could discern that she was lying, but hey, she was a theatre major, she could lie about anything.

Ophelia grudgingly slumped, rolled her eyes and went to open her bag, opening it to show a Manila envelope, which she dropped on the table in front of Helga. Helga opened it and poured out the contents.

She had to raise an eyebrow. Inside was a very beautiful digital portrait, of a boy who wasn’t looking at the viewer, but somewhere off in the distance. It was done in anime style, judging by the fact that the boy in question was wearing some form of seifuku. From what Helga saw of Freddy in class, it was an incredible likeness. It was a tad too narrow in some aspects, and she was pretty sure that the boy’s hair was not that shiny, but it was remarkable talent for a 9-year-old.

It was also covered with glitter glue, pink ribbons, and gold marker pens, but Helga wasn’t judging. Or she was a little, but hey, nine-year-olds were not the best judge of art. It was still very very good.

“Damn, girl.” Helga whistled. “I’m very impressed.”

Ophelia snorted, “Well, yeah of course I am, I’m very talented, practically a child prodigy.” the girl scoffed. Helga noticed the tension that she had when she gave the envelope over was now gone, her shoulders relaxed and not hunched. She also now had a little smile playing on her lips, and her eyes seemed to soften. Clearly, she was happy and a little relieved to find out that someone else appreciated and liked her art.

Alongside the portrait were two things: a letter addressed to Freddy and a few sweets thrown in. Helga had to raise another eyebrow at this: the sweets were not commonly found at the local supermarket, after all. They were in fact-

“Wasabi Gummies?” She asked. “These are pricey, kiddo, and very specific. How much stalking did you do to find out this kid’s candy preferences?” Then, as an afterthought- “Also, as an adult, I feel like I should tell you that stalking is not the best way to woo anyone, especially if you want a meaningful relationship with this guy.”

Snapping out of her satisfied smile, Ophelia looked shocked, opening and closing her mouth to figure out a good answer to shoot back at Helga. “Who… who says I want a relationship with this guy!” she stammered. “Just because this guy is smart and funny doesn’t mean I want to get married to him or something, what would a marriage or wedding or even a life with him be like? I certainly don’t imagine our cat furbaby Ginger and her babies Carol, Judy and Marilyn -”
“Exactly how long did you even think about this, Ophelia?” Helga asked, amused. “Also, Carol, Judy, Marilyn, AND Ginger? What kind of cat names are those?”

“Sh-SHUT UP!” Ophelia snatched the portrait back. “Give that back, you blonde bimbo, I spent two days on that thing—”

“Two days?” she said, whistling. “Damn, I am impressed.”

“And for your information, I didn’t stalk him!” Ophelia snapped. “I just happened to run into him a lot, and happen to be very observant. The candy thing was a matter of trial and error—”

“Trial and error?” Helga repeated slowly. “What, like you put a bunch of sweets in front of him and experimented with what he liked best? I thought you’ve never met each other before.”

“Well…yeeeeeeeeeeahhhhh.” Ophelia scrunched up her face and made a gesture that meant, ‘You may or may not like this next bit.’ “See, I’ve been leaving him…sweets and stuff…”

Helga nodded, “Yeah, but how exactly…”

“Well, he likes to hang around this spot during recess…and well, I leave the sweets there.” Ophelia said. “Sometimes, they’re hard candies, sometimes they’re gummy bears…he responds very well to the Wasabi Gummies—”

“You’ve been…leaving the sweets out for him?” Helga said, her tone rising with incredulousness. “Responds very well…have you been feeding him like a stray cat?!?”

Ophelia nodded sheepishly.

“And he’s been eating them? Like you leave sweets on a bush or something and he eats them? No suspicion whatsoever?!” Helga decided that her head was feeling a little light, so she let her head rest on the tabletop of the diner. “I have so many questions…”

“Hey, it’s not my fault he likes sweets!” Ophelia retorted. “Sides, he eats it every time, he thinks it’s like Mario Kart—”

“I have so many questions regarding this weird child of nature, and why you like him, and even how you met this child.” Helga muttered. “Why is he eating random sweets on the ground with no suspicion on who’s giving them to him? Why is he even a real child? Is he related to Curly Gammelthrope, or the Joker?”

“Hey, hey, just because you’re a bitter old lady who doesn’t know what love is, you don’t come for me and my life choices, okay?” Ophelia chided. “Also, who are those people? Don’t make up stuff just to shame me, oldie.”

Helga whipped her head back up quickly, “Kid, you have no idea what love is like, okay? And also, when I was nine, I made all the same mistakes as you, and let me tell you, it didn’t go very well. On the plus side, you’re braver than I am, so hurrah for you, but still—”

Ophelia scoffed again. “Well, duh, you’re totally a wuss.” Then, as though it was an afterthought, “So you might as well tell me what happened with yours. If I don’t want to end up like you, you might as well tell me everything. If I’m gonna be successful, I need to learn from my elders and stuff like that.”

Helga snorted. “I’m only 20 years older than you, kid—”
“See? Elder. Totally ancient. You could totally be like my mom or something—”

“I don’t wanna talk about how old I am, Ophelia.” Helga raised a hand to the ever attentive Mrs Banks. “Hi, I would like two orange juice refills for me and my niece here, leave the jug here, I think we’ll be here for awhile.” Helga smiled as she turned back to the girl. “It started when I was 4…”

When Arnold got back to the apartment at 5, he saw Helga, slumped over the kitchen island, pouring over papers. She looked a little hassled, but she also looked entranced. He smiled despite himself as she looked up, and he walked over, dropping his bag down.” The kids doing okay?” he asked.

Helga dropped her red pen, and rubbed her face, leaving marks of black behind her hand and smudge marks around her eyes. She clearly didn’t realise that she was still wearing eyeliner. “Man, your kids are certainly creative, Shortman.” She grumbled, shaking her head. “You’re lucky I like them.” She then scrunched up her face. “I should have finished this ages ago, but noooooo—”

Arnold chuckled, as he went to the fridge to grab a glass of juice. “Procrastinated again, did we?” he teased. At some point during the months when they talked, he was on the receiving ends of tons of messages bemoaning the fact that she was doing everything but writing, including the time she learnt the entire choreography of Beyonce’s Love On Top instead of finishing her work before a deadline. He was used to talk about being late on deadlines.

“I wish.” Helga raised her shoulders and moved them around jerkily. “I just… okay, so today…I met my niece.”

Arnold stopped drinking his juice and placed it slowly back down on the counter next to the sink. “Okay…what?”

“It’s a long, complicated story—”

“I’ve got time for your long stories, Helga.” He said. “You know I always do.”

Helga got up from her seat, and started talking, waving her hands when she did so, and Arnold settled down by grabbing the other chair from the kitchenette and looking at Helga, listening attentively, as Helga started telling the story from her seeing little Ophelia at the school grounds, to her confronting her and taking her out for a meal, and then agreeing reluctantly to help the girl with wooing Freddy Coogler tomorrow.

At some point, Helga hopped off her chair and started pacing back and forth, still gesturing heavily, and at the end, she was so drained that when she finished, she grabbed Arnold’s glass of half-drunk orange juice and chugged it down, placing the glass down heavily on the counter with a clunk. Arnold mulled it all over.

“So…Ophelia huh?”

Helga waved her hands again. “Yes!”

“She’s certainly…very passionate.”

“I would say so!” Helga exclaimed. “She’s a hell load like me at that age! All passion, all the yelling…you should have seen her, Arnoldo, she’s fucking amazing! Her art…did I tell you she did art? It’s that Japanese anime style and she says it’s cause a cousin gave her a bunch of manga
Arnold listened patiently again while Helga went on another spiel that was a fangirl moment over her Niece. It was kinda sweet that Helga was so supportive of someone related to her like that, especially since it had only been a day since she found out about Ophelia. Helga clearly liked kids, and while she grumbled sometimes about wanting to chase small children away from her porch, she was mostly bark and no bite. It was one of the few things he loved about her.

Wait.

Did he just use the word love in relation to Helga?

Love?

LOOOOOOVE?!!!!!

“- and she uses a hell load of glitter which can blind anyone used to looking at the sun and - Football Head, you alright?”

Arnold blinked, and realised where he was: in the middle of his kitchen, next to Helga Pataki, the woman he realised he might love.

Love.

Oh god. This was not supposed to happen.

”I’m… I’m good, I’m fine.” He muttered.

“ You sure? Your eyes seem glassy like you just got a fever or something,” Helga reached a hand out to touch his forehead and he flinched back slightly.

“Woah,” Helga said, a touch of concern creeping up in her voice. “Are you sure you’re okay? Do you need soup or something? We can totally do Chinese food again, nothing too much for dinner-” She stretched her hand out again and he flinched again.

“I’m fine!” he blurted out, a little louder than expected. “I’m fine. Peachy, amazing!”

“Geez, Football Head, you sure you okay?” Helga replied, now sounding a little defensive and hurt. “Don’t snap at me like I killed your cat or something.”

Damn, now he was slapping himself in the face mentally. He figures out he might be in love with her and the first thing he does is snap at her? He was going to have to look up on the bloody real estate in Timbuktu again judging by the way his life was going.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” Arnold said, wincing. He then threw in a rather lame excuse about how work was getting him down, hoping Helga would buy it.

She did, relaxing. She still looked a teensy bit wary but she didn’t look hurt anymore. Arnold decided to change the subject. “So erm… you and Ophelia…she doesn’t know you’re her
Helga nodded, reaching a hand out to shake her ponytail loose. “Right, right. At this point, she thinks I’m a fuddy duddy stranger who cares a lot about the security of the school and who shares a hell load of embarrassing secrets about herself. I’m just helping her out, nothing more.”

She smirked at Arnold, and that did not do anything to help Arnold feel better about his whole, ‘I might be in love with the woman I love now and yes the extra love part is meant to be redundant let’s just fucking get back to what’s happening’ situation, and continued.

“Also, I forced her to go back to school straight after lunch, can you believe she’s been skipping school for the past few months so she can give Weird Boy sweets?”

"Don’t call him Weird Boy, Helga.” Arnold forced himself to say mildly. It was, at the very least, something he could say that he could still seem relatively normal about. Judging by Helga’s eye-roll, it worked.

"Arnoldo, I’m an aunt now, I can be protective over my niece and critical of her choice of partner. And she has questionable choices as it is!” She grabbed Arnold’s orange juice glass and went to the fridge, opening the bottle and refilling the glass. “She says she’s fine cause apparently she could skip first period or something, but honestly, I’m surprised she’s even top of the class with her work etiquette. I think I love her, but I wish I could become her sensei.”

“Her…sensei?”

“Teacher, mentor, mother-figure, or aunt figure in this case; the Obi-Wan to her Anakin, the Obi-Wan to her Luke…Damn, is it me or was Obi-Wan Kenobi not a great choice to mentor ANYONE of the Skywalker family?”

She drank the juice again, this time at a much slower pace, and continued. “In any case, she needs guidance. Can you believe she thinks that stalking the boy is a good way to get to know someone? I mean, I’ve been in her shoes, and I can tell you stalking someone is just not the -”

At that point, Arnold detected that Helga’s eyes had widened before she started choking on the orange juice, coughing heavily.

“Helga!” Arnold ran over, grabbing the juice glass away from her and placing it safely on the counter before he steered Helga safely away from the glass and onto the couch across the room. “You okay? You alright?”

Helga coughed, her eyes watering, causing her eyeliner to smudge even more. “I’m fine!” she said in a strangled voice before she coughed again. Arnold debated over whether getting water was a good idea since she clearly just choked on the orange juice.

“I think you should stay away from all liquids from now on,” Arnold said, mostly joking, as he made sure that Helga and himself were now comfortably seated on the couch. “You seem to be coughing a bit, you okay?”

Helga had stopped coughing, and she had shaken her head twice before she mustered a smile and said, “I’m good, I swear, I promise!”

Arnold relaxed, hoping that she was truly feeling better before he realised two things:
1) When he was steering Helga away from the kitchenette and on to the couch, he had his arm around her to support her because she was nearly bent double when she was coughing her lungs out, and making sure she didn't fall down was a priority.

2) His arm was still around Helga, and in the course of trying to get her comfortable, he was now seated really close to her. Really really close. Helga was really warm from the exertions of her coughing, and with her weight against his, she was softer that he expected, but still a solid weight against his side.

Hoping that his blush was not obvious to the still suffering Helga, he slowly took his arm away from her shoulder and tried to naturally, and rather smoothly, slide away from her.

He figured he did an okay job.

Helga was staring at him. Even with her smudged liner, she still looked amazingly adorable. “Erm, you okay? You look flushed. Are you sure you’re not sick or something?”

Perhaps it was a good thing he didn’t play poker for a living. “I…I think I’m good.”

”Liar,” Helga said bluntly. She reached over and finally placed a hand on his forehead. The contact of her hand on his head made him shiver, a little.

She made a tsk sound with her teeth. “You don’t feel sick, but I think you might be coming down with something—”

He quickly extradited himself from the couch and yelled something out about needing the bathroom. He barely heard Helga’s reply as he slammed the door of the bathroom.

He locked the door and collapsed on the cool, porcelain bowl of the toilet. He placed his head on his hands.

What the fuck was wrong with him! He quietly bemoaned.

Feeling a lump in his pants pocket, he only relaxed a tiny bit when he realised that it was his phone. He grabbed it, and hoping that his friends would take mercy on him, he opened his message app and texted Nadine and Gerald.

So I may have just realised I might be in love with Helga.

Neither of them replied immediately. He leaned his head against the cold bathroom tiled wall, hoping that he could figure out his life choices. He decided to take some time, doing some toiletry business and rethinking his life choices, hoping his heart would stop beating out of his chest.

He had flushed the toilet and washed his hands and face, feeling a little bit back to his old self, when his phone finally vibrated, signalling a text. He opened it, and read the message Nadine had left him.

*deep breath*

Why did he only have two friends to confide in this? Arnold thought grumpily. Why.
As he thought that, another text message popped up. This one was from Gerald.

Bro, you only figure this like….now?

Arnold rolled his eyes.

WE’VE EDSTABLISHED I’N A BIT DENSE IN MATTERS LIKE THIS, OKAY? He typed back furiously, not caring that his spelling was obviously incorrect.

The reply came back almost instantaneously.

Also, you realised that you figured this out on the eve of Valentine’s Day, right?

Arnold’s eyes widened. Gerald had to be kidding.

He opened his calendar app and groaned. Of course.

Helga said that Ophelia wanted help with something happening tomorrow.

Tomorrow was Valentine’s Day.

It made sense. Everything made sense now.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door. “Hey, Arnoldo? You doing okay in there?” Helga’s voice, muffled by the wooden door, could be heard, the notes of concern clear.

Arnold squeezed his eyes shut, and forced his brain to calm down. “Yeah, I…I think it was stomach pains or something! I’ll just take awhile and I’ll be okay in a bit!”

He just told the woman he possibly loved that he might be having stomach problems. It was the most unromantic thing he had ever said to someone he was interested in.

“Well, if you’re sure…” Helga said, sounding hesitant. “I found some Pedialyte in the fridge, and I got you a glass of water to wash it down with… it’ll be on the kitchen counter, so when you’re done you can get some, okay?”

What a wonder. What a saint. He managed to croak out something giving his assent before he heard her footsteps moving away from the bathroom.

He went back to face himself in the mirror again, just to check on his appearance, and make sure his lie was plausible when he received another text message from Gerald.

When he opened it, he groaned.

It was a Youtube link that led Arnold to a Whitney Houston music video, titled, “And I Will Always Love You.”

Fuck my life. He thought.

Maybe if he left the plug in the sink and dunked his head in, he could drown and feel better about his life choices.
.............WILL
ALWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAYSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS
LAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRVRVEEEEEEEEEEEEF
YOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUUU.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

So.

What happened Soliloquys? What happened to uploading another chapter earlier?

This can be very easily explained...after the break.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next day, it was Helga’s turn to place a steaming cup of coffee in front of an Arnold slumped on top of the kitchen counter. Gerald, who had woken up earlier for the second day in a row, sat next to him, a little more alert and blankets still wrapped around him. He accepted a coffee mug from Helga with thanks.

“Okay so I didn’t know which mugs you guys used—“Helga began, “But I made educated guesses.”

Gerald pawed at the mug in front of him with a bit more finesse than expected for a man used to waking up later than usual. “Unless Arnold is a fan of Stephen Curry, you’ve got it right.” He nodded. “Impressive. Also, coffee?”

Helga chuckled ruefully. “I used to be a barista.” She said. “I know my way around a coffee machine...though yours is older than I expected. But also, it has stuff I never thought I would see.”

She gestured towards the machine in question. Most of it was recognisable as an industrial old model, which, while well-cared for, was still worn with faded scratches in the dull metal polish. The sides, however, contained some really rather fancy machinery that Helga had recognised and used before but also didn’t expect to work with an older machine of this model.

Gerald laughed,” Well, it was a gift from my parents when I left for college.” He said. “They kept telling me that it was important I don’t spend too much money on cafe coffees, something about how expensive it was to buy Starbucks coffees every day and eventually, after going broke for the 4th time in months because of the coffee habit, I decided to use the machine for the first time.”

He glanced back at the machine with fondness. “It’s never let me down. Got me through papers, nighttime video editing, post-sex bonding... it’s basically my new sibling now. “

Gerald pack-bonding with a coffee machine was actually a pretty sweet story. “And the… modifications?” Helga motioned towards the extra bits the machine seemed to have.

“That’s due to my man and his magic fingers!” Gerald grinned, nudging the man in question. Arnold’s only reaction was to shift a little towards the direction that Gerald had hit him with, but otherwise nothing else.

“This guy’s really handy with a screwdriver and some tools. He went online, read up he could, started building attachments that managed to link up with the machine, updated the programs and voila!” He waved his mug around. “I get coffee of any kind when I want to. One of my work clients
got me a free supply of fancy coffee beans and other yummy stuff, so we’ve been making café-styled drinks for everyone when we can.”

He winked at Helga. “That’s not the only thing my man can do with his fingers through…” he smirked.

Helga’s only reaction was to laugh because Gerald was hilarious. Also, once again, judging by Gerald’s innuendo, it really didn’t make sense that Arnold was single.

Helga was about to say exactly that when her eyes fell on the slumped figure next to Gerald on the counter and frowned. “Should we... be worried about him?” She asked tentatively.

“ It’s cool. He had some very interesting news yesterday, and he just needs time to recover from it. “Gerald stuck out a hand to poke at Arnold’s side. The man’s reaction was to swat lazily back at him. Gerald turned back to Helga. “He’s fine.” He reassured her.

Helga smiled hesitantly. She really didn’t expect Arnold of all people to be this sleepy and tired in the morning. By most accounts, he was a morning person. She, on the other hand, wasn’t.

Yet here they were, Helga up and ready, and Arnold looking like he could barely stand. It was a role reversal she really wasn’t expecting.

She raised an eyebrow at Gerald, who was drinking from his mug with more enthusiasm than she was expecting. Then a thought occurred to her. “Is he upset cause he’s single and alone on Valentine’s?”

Gerald gave her an all-knowing look. “We’ll just say that you’re not wrong.” He said cryptically. “I mean, I get it, the man is lonely, so am I. However, this guy can get his problem solved very very very easily. “

Was it just her or was he looking at her a bit more intensely than before?

Helga said, confused,” Well I guess I can go and introduce him to some of my friends who like guys, but I don’t know anyone who might be interested in long distance...”

Gerald opened his mouth to react but then a small moan erupted from Arnold and the blonde man raised his head to reveal dark circles under bloodshot eyes. Helga took the opportunity to push the mug towards Arnold. “Bad night?” She asked sympathetically.

“ Mwhdlrpppph.” Arnold murmured. Helga took it as a yes.

“ It’s okay, buddy.” She said. “Valentine’s Day is a total lie. You don’t need it. You dazzle on your own.” She gestured towards the coffee again. “Drink, fellow loser.” She cajoled. “We’re all single, sad people, and we can go and celebrate being sad later, how about that?”

Arnold looked at her blearily, while Gerald was sipping his coffee nodding enthusiastically. “I do like a bit of beer with my saltiness.” Gerald enthused.

Arnold made a noise that sounded like, “Mtzplix.”

Helga frowned. Arnold may be her friend, but dammit she would like a bit of a reaction to her coffee mix. She was, according to Patty who drank her coffee every day when they were in the same town
during college, EXTREMELY good with mixing drinks.

“Sheesh, Football Face, can you at least wake up to drink this coffee? “She sighed exasperatedly. “I woke up early just to make this to thank you for bringing me to school,” She made a move to grab his mug. If Sleepy McSleepyface was going to be this annoying, she was going to be nice and add another shot of espresso in his cup. The machine could do it.

Just as her hands closed on the mug handle, Arnold’s hand had reached out to grope the mug absentmindedly, accidentally brushing his fingers against her knuckles. It was a brief touch but Helga could feel the warmth from his fingers before he quickly snatched his hand back.

Helga nearly flinched from the reaction but managed with her last stable nerve to not react.Did the man just…react from an accidental hand brush?

The man in question looked a little abashed at having such a reaction and murmured a sorry before making a proper grab of the mug again, taking a sip and mumbling something about how the coffee was amazing, thank you very much.

Helga nodded tersely and then excused herself to the bathroom. She took a look at herself in the mirror, frowning.

She looked…fine.

She had her hair braided today, having got up a little earlier in her excitement.

She didn’t have any stains on her chosen outfit, and she felt that the Docs lent her a bit more comfort and familiarity which meant she wasn’t walking around all awkward and weird.

She even sniffed herself to make sure that she didn’t smell bad. Sometimes she forgot to put deodorant and it was disastrous.

She smelt perfectly fine.

So, what would cause someone as congenial as Arnold to shy away from her like that?

She didn’t even expect this to happen. She woke up earlier all excited and happy because today was Valentine’s Day, and the plan to help Ophelia give her gift to The Weird Child Of The 4th Grade was going to happen exactly as she had planned.

Well, it was less a plan and more a, “Take the Painting In Question and Place It in Freddy’s Cubby Hole” situation. Since Helga was able to access the classroom, she could do it. Ophelia had grudgingly admitted that having someone on the inside helped. Helga smugly replied that she was proud someone as competent as Ophelia could recognise the importance of changing plans when needed. The little eye roll Ophelia gave her was not as blistering as it should be, because of the small smile she gave Helga.

She was still riding on that high of yesterday’s encounter with her niece.

So why was this Arnold thing getting to her now?

She looked at her reflection in the mirror and sighed. Her bangs now were annoying her. Did they intentionally grow to poke her unnecessarily in the eyes? And speaking of eyes... was her eyeliner
...smudging? And her contour now a little too dark? Her earlier self-confidence and good mood was slowly disappearing bit by bit. Now all she was was a nervous wreck, that was probably channeled towards a slow, burning anger mixed with anxiety. She thought they were becoming friends! She thought he was okay with her in the house? Why did he just recoil from her touch now?

Was it because she was hideous? Did she do something that offended him? What could it be...Was it because she was bisexual?

It ... could make sense. But then again why open his house and make such a big fuss over room sleeping, why pick her up from the airport? Why take her to breakfast?

Next to that doubt was a small growing bud of controlled, yet hot and heated ball of an emotion she hadn’t felt much in the last few years.

How dare he?

How dare that man make her feel this ... this small? This unattractive? This...this... angry?

Anger. Yes. That was the emotion she felt. It made sense.

How fucking dare he make her feel this upset over herself?!

She could feel her nails digging into her palm. Her nails, recently painted by fingernail polish borrowed from Eugene, felt short and stubby and imperfect, but she would gladly use every bit of its bluntness to scratch Arnold’s eyes out if every bit of her anxiety regarding the man was true.

That... that annoying fucker of annoying fuckiness!

Huh. She was pretty sure she used to be more eloquent than this when expressing her emotional outlook. Perhaps she was getting old at 30.

Or the ramifications of waking up this early was finally hitting her.

Or even that for some reason, the creator of the universe, whomever they might be, was unable to help her articulate her anger into words.

Either way.

**GRAGH THAT FOOTBALL HEADED FUCKER.**

For the 100th time that morning, sitting in the bus seat next to a silent Helga, Arnold felt like everything that happened was his fault.

He wasn’t sure what it was but it might have been the reason why Helga G Pataki had her legs up against the back of the seat in front of her, curled up like a ball and steadily ignoring except for tense answers to some of his questions, all while tapping furiously at her phone like a sullen teenager.

He inwardly sighed, but he didn’t think getting her to talk about her problems right away was good. It made sense to let her fume in anger. So, to occupy his time, he took a page out of Helga’s book and took out his phone.
Gerald. I think she’s angry.

The reply was instantaneous.

Well, she has to be if she falls for your loserly ass.

Arnold sneaked a quick look at Helga and found no change in her mood. He quickly typed back. I think I fucked up something

No shit, my man. We discussed this earlier. WTF was up with you just now, btw?

What?

Dude. You’re dense like chocolate pudding sometimes. You totally fucked up just now.

Arnold scanned back to the events of the morning and all he got was a blur of events. His memory of that past hour was dulled by his fatigue of not sleeping well the night before as well as not getting that cup of coffee he usually had.

Let’s say I don’t remember what happened. He typed.

Arnold, you cracker. This is why you don’t have girlfriends.

Before Arnold could react to that statement, he was jolted out of his thoughts by Helga shifting in her seat and saying. “Football Face.”

She sounded a little frosty. Arnold winced despite himself.

“H-hey.” He managed. Be cool, Shortman. You’ve somehow made her mad. Just apologise and make her happy again. “Look, I’m sorry about just now. What I did was wrong.”

Helga cocked an eyebrow. “What do you mean?” She asked benignly, though Arnold could hear that touch of steel in her tone that meant she was not buying it.

He scanned back to his memories again, rubbing his neck as he did so. “I’m... sorry about... not drinking the coffee immediately earlier?” He ventured a guess.

Silence.

Helga’s face softened, but she didn’t look gratified. She just looked a bit sad.

“Look, Football Head.” She said. “You don’t have to feel sorry for anything. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Arnold felt like he was missing something, and also disappointing her in one fell swoop. It wasn’t a very good feeling. “I...”

But Helga was now getting up and pushing past Arnold. “Aaaaaannnnnd look! We’ve arrived! Another day, another dollar, am I right, Shortman?” She forcefully brushed past a few standing commuters, all who were unceremoniously swept off their feet by the tornado that was Helga, and
some were grumbling unhappily at the rough treatment.

Arnold, gaping, realised she was right, and raced after her, trying to make himself seem smaller than his tall stature as he apologised profusely at the previously bowled over passengers, and followed Helga, who had disembarked and could now be seen striding across the road towards the metal fence that surrounded the outside of PS 118.

He managed to catch up with her just as she stopped, looking around for something. She paused when she realised Arnold was next to her and judging by her hesitance, Arnold felt that whatever she was doing, she didn’t want Arnold around for it.

He was right.

“Look, Arnoldo. Not that I don’t want you around or nothing, but if Ophelia’s like me, she won’t want no one like you around. You’re ...” She gave him a look from head to toe. “ Kinda nerdy for this op. I don’t want to be associated with no snitch.”

Arnold, appalled, tried to protest.

“ Dude.” Helga patted him on the shoulder and, oh god, was she actually looking at him with pity? “ Search your feelings. You know it to be true. Also your outfit. It just screams teacher. I’ll see you in ten minutes, just meet me outside the classroom, okay?”

Arnold decided not to protest and sighed. “ I’ll... see you in ten minutes.” He said, making a move towards the school doors. Helga didn’t even turn back to look at him, she had given him an absent-minded wave as she walked off to meet Ophelia.

Ten minutes later, as she had promised, Helga made her way up the stairs to Arnold Shortman’s 4th Grade class, holding a giant manila envelope containing Ophelia’s painting. After the more tumultuous emotional rollercoaster she went through because of Arnold, meeting up with Ophelia actually managed to set her back on track.

It was actually kinda cute to see her niece get all flustered when she saw Helga and threatened to slash Helga if the plan didn’t work properly. Not that the threat scared Helga in any way, she was way taller than she was, for one thing, and older as well. If need be, she would be able to squish her.

However, the niece actually panicky and nervous and yet grumpy and excited and still able to threaten a near stranger was a sign things were going to be okay with Ophelia. Helga promised that she would take photographic evidence and send it to Ophelia’s messages, provided she actually returned to school and stopped skipping classes for the day. The resulting staring contest between the two of them was short but decisive, and Helga left the meeting feeling great that she was almost a positive influence on a child’s life.Hell, if this gig continued, maybe she could use it to impart knowledge on kids, maybe through the books. Arnold might even be proud of her.

The man in question was currently standing outside the door and seemed to be having a furious debate with Nadine Jones, who was furiously waving her arms and whispering in loud, angry spurts. Arnold meanwhile was doing the same thing, looking a little less forceful and more resigned about the entire situation. Something about the expression on Arnold’s face gave her pause but she didn’t stop herself from pushing that thought aside and making her way to the both of them.
"Hey!" she said, a little louder than she would normally do, but only because she wanted to give them a heads up and let them know someone was approaching so they would be able to disperse and pretend she didn’t know they were arguing about something. Nadine was the first person to break away from the Angry Whisper Match and wave her over. Arnold followed suit, but with a little more hesitance.

She walked over, shifting the envelope in her hands. “Anyone in there?” she asked. It made sense to focus on helping Ophelia with her thing instead of being nosy about what Arnold and Nadine were arguing about. She hoped it wasn’t an affair between Arnold and Nadine. Despite Nadine’s protests yesterday, if Arnold and Nadine actually did run off into the sunset one day, it would make sense.

Arnold gestured towards the classroom door. “Empty,” he said with a smile. Helga smiled and walked right in. She quickly identified Freddy Coogler’s cubby hole, and slid the envelope right in, making sure that it was the exact space she was looking. She took out her phone, snapped a quick picture and, with a cavalier toss of her head, she walked right out of the classroom and stopped at the door.

Where Arnold and Nadine were still standing, looking awkward. Okay, the curiosity was killing her, just a little.” You guys okay?” she asked.

“Never better!” Nadine chirped.

Maybe that was the wrong way of asking about things especially when it was obvious neither one of the two wanted to talk about it.

Come lunchtime, Helga thought things were going pretty okay. Freddy had received the package in class, opened it with more enthusiasm than expected and when he had looked at the painting, he had looked at it curiously. Helga had no idea what to make of it.

After today, she had no idea what to make of cis-hetero men and their motives and actions. Maybe it was a sign that dating women full time was the way to go.

Not that all her experiences with women were smooth sailing...

**WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DONT KNOW WHAT HES FEELING OMG I HATE YOU SO MUCH RIGHT NOW.**

Case study one.

**WELL, HE OPENED THE ENVELOPE, SAW THE PAINTING AND HE ALSO OPENED THE LETTER YOU PUT IN AND ATE THE WASABI SWEETS!** she countered, typing furiously on her phone. **WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?!**

She didn’t receive a reply for a while. Not that she was looking down at her phone to check or anything.

“ You okay with having lunch at the lunchroom today?” Arnold asked as they walked down the corridors of the school while children rushed around them. “Think of it as an apology for this morning. “
“Arnoldo, I keep telling you, you don’t need to apologise for this morning.” She said exasperatedly. The clueless fucker may be anger inducing but, as said, he was a clueless fucker. What she was feeling was more or less her own perceived feelings of the situation at hand which may or may not be a result of overthinking the situation.

Probably. It had happened before.

She knew the feeling all too well after all, especially with regards to this guy.

She felt bad for him, to be honest. He didn’t deserve her taking his emotions out on him. The man was obviously befuddled due to not being able to enjoy Valentine’s Day with a significant other. It wasn’t his fault he was sometimes kind of silly.

“At least let me buy lunch to apologise!” He was saying. “They have Jello today, I’m not too sure what kind - “

“ You know what, Football Head? I’ll let you do it,” she said at last. “I mean, only because I feel bad for you being alone and sad on Valentine’s Day, after all. This could be the only date you get in months.”

Here, Arnold blushed and Helga felt bad for reminding him how he was single, so she, in an effort to change the subject, she said,” You’ve got to find a better way to kill me though, poisoning via cafeteria food is passé as ...eff.” She finished lamely when she remembered the PG warning Arnold had given her the day before. The little kids that brushed past her made her thankful that she didn’t.

Arnold looked relieved, his face had returned to its normal complexion, and smiled shakily. “I wouldn’t murder you via cafeteria food, Helga. If I do have to kill you, I promise it’ll be more thrilling than that.”

That was... the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her, to be honest.

“ I’ll... hold you to that...” she relented, rolling her eyes in exasperated fondness. Arnold’s smile, steadier this time, was warmer and Helga had to wonder just what it was about this guy that made him the goof he was, and yet still so endearing. And probably naive.

Hopefully whoever dated him next was not someone who was going to take advantage of his good will and all that.

They walked towards the cafeteria, which was still the same muddy brown colour, but filled with colourful pictures of the food groups. The kids, in comparison to her own youth, were dressed a little more in fashion (there weren’t any Jinco jeans, for one thing), but she could still spot kids wearing chokers, dressed in overalls over colourful long-sleeved shirts, high waisted jeans, plaid shirts...it was so different and yet exactly the same as her childhood in the 90s.

She just couldn’t deny it. She was a 90s kid through and through, and nothing in this cafeteria convinced her that she had left the 90s.

Arnold, who had grabbed a tray at the front of the lunch queue, nudged the tray towards her as he grabbed one for himself. They grabbed the food they wanted, Helga making a face when the lunch lady plopped what seemed to be grey-brown meat stewing in grey-brown sauce and grabbed a cup of mac and cheese. At one point, Arnold stopped so suddenly and Helga nearly walked right into
“Dude!” She said, half complaining.

“Sorry!” He said, half apologetically, but amused. He turned to show her what he had in his hand, which was a cup of green Jello. “Remember? Green Jello? I once stood in this very cafeteria line contemplating what made green Jello green, while you nearly tried to smack me because I was holding up the line.”

Helga did remember that day, and she snorted. “It’s like the universe is conspiring to make us repeat history.” She drawled.

She pretended to raise her hand in mock anger, Arnold pretended to cower good naturedly while fending her off with a Jello cup, and they both made their way to the teacher’s seating area, chatting lightly. They both ate their lunches, goofing around a little, joking about the origins of mystery meat, and if cafeteria food was even worth the cheap prices. Arnold even said something about possibly stocking up on cafeteria food to feed him and Gerald for a month because it never went bad and teaching didn’t always pay much. Helga laughed, and she was even positive that Arnold was only joking about cafeteria food.

Just as they were about to start on their Jello cups, Helga, who was across from Arnold and facing the window that led out to the playground, saw a flash of someone running by in a very familiar uniform.

Frowning, she put her spoon down.

Arnold, who was looking right at her, saw her put her spoon down and looked concerned. “You okay there, Helga?”

“I think …” She racked her head to figure out a way to explain herself, but she decided that it was a waste of time. “I think Ophelia’s here, “she said as she got up from the chair. “I got to go!”

Arnold opened his mouth to reply but Helga was already off the chair and racing towards the doors.

What was Ophelia doing here after Helga told her to go back to school? She racked her brain to figure out why she would be doing so.

The best guess she had was when she remembered that the big manila had a smaller envelope in the painting that was inserted inside, the fact that the painting was done in an anime-sque style, and this was done during Valentine’s Day. If Helga’s memories of Phoebe’s anime obsession served her right (she had at points watched anime with Phoebe just to see what the hype was about), Valentine’s Day in Japan was a common time for confessions of love to occur.

Judging by Ophelia’s art style, she was a fan of Japanese anime. If she was similar to Helga in having a sentimental side (and judging by her art style, she was) , she probably read a lot of other shoujo manga, which meant she probably subscribed to the same philosophy.

Unlike Helga, she had more confidence and probably never knew the feeling of defeat. And would probably go straight to confessing her love for the kid full speed ahead.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and ran out the entrance of the school, skidding behind a wall just as she spotted Ophelia, who was pouring her heart to the creepy kid. She made sure to hide behind a few trashcans, crouching low to make sure she wasn’t seen. The trick was to make sure she
was quiet as a mouse…

“Helga, what are you doing?” Arnold, who unbeknownst to Helga had followed her, was crouched down behind her, curiously looking over her shoulder just to see what was happening. Helga, thanks to many improv classes in college, did not scream when she heard his voice behind her. She did, however, jump a little, and upon seeing that it was Arnold, slapped him right across the arm.

He lost his balance, a little. Luckily for him, that did not mean he dropped the jello cup that he was still eating out of, the bastard.

“WHY DID YOU FOLLOW ME! “she hissed. “ALSO WHY ARE YOU STILL EATING THE DAMN JELLO CUP?”

“I was distracted trying to follow you!” he whispered back. “What’s happening?”

“Ophelia’s here.” she said, turning back to look at the scene happening in front of her.

“Your niece? “he said. ‘I thought you said she went back to school already!”

“She LIED, obviously!” she snarled. “It’s Valentine’s Day, what do you think people do?”

“…. Lie?”

“No, you dolt!” she gestured back. “Look! She’s clearly confessing her love for him! She’s –“

She turned back to look at Ophelia and Freddy and had to stop.

Something was wrong.

She couldn’t hear a thing they were saying, of course. However, Freddy’s face looked terrified, and Ophelia’s voice was getting louder and louder. She also seemed to be waving her hands around a bit, and she didn’t seem to look happy. Freddy was trying to placate her but didn’t seem to be doing a good job. Finally, Ophelia gave a scream of frustration and ran off, going straight past Helga and Arnold’s hiding spot. Judging by the sounds she was making, she was crying.

Helga and Arnold looked at each other, both at a loss for what to do.

“I’ll take Ophelia, you take Freddy.” She said, already getting up to follow after the girl.

“What? How-“

“Use your skills of improv, Arnold!” She yelled back as she raced off, already hoping that Ophelia wasn’t too far away.

Chapter End Notes

SO I HAD WORK AND IT WAS DRAINING MY HEAD AND ALSO THIS CHAPTER WAS HARD OKAY.

I wanna thank the people in my life for not abandoning me during these troubling times.
Also you all, for leaving me lovely reviews.
Chapter 30

It wasn’t hard to find Ophelia. She was up the same tree that Helga had found her the first time.

It was harder to hear the sounds of someone trying to stifle the sounds of crying, especially from a child.

Helga wracked her brain, trying to figure out how exactly to approach the situation, especially with a nine-year-old as passionate and emotional as Ophelia was. She wasn’t a professional, and there was no way giving her cliched platitudes would work.

What could she do in this case?

She figured the best way was to channel three of the most sensible people she knew in her approach: Phoebe, with her calm, sensitive demeanour; Patty, with her practical, truthful manner, and her old therapist, Dr Teresa Bliss, who in her later years had become a friend.

What Would Dr Bliss Do?

What, in this case, would Teresa advise?

“You know, if you wanted to spy on me, you should stop being so clompingly big and loud.” came a haughty voice heard from above the tree. Helga could still hear the hurt in the kid’s light voice, and this time, the drollish tone she usually had was dulled by sniffing.

Helga sighed. “You found me then.” She said simply. She should have known that the Doc Martens would give her away.

She sat down at the base of the tree, tucking her knees up to her chest, and leaning back against the trunk. The tree was wide enough that the branches shaded her from the bright sun, and she could tilt her head back and look up at the sky.

It was a pretty nice day out, admittedly. She liked sunny days. It meant that she could do things, run errands, meet with friends. Bad weather days always meant schedules had to be moved around and she hated changing things after getting them planned out.

She liked this, lying back and looking up at the sky. The past few days were so busy and full of events that she really didn’t have time to just relax, especially in her head. It was mostly just rushing from one emotion to another, and while she had accepted a while ago that expressing feelings was not a bad thing, she did enjoy a little peace and quiet once in awhile.

Of course, right now she was also dealing with an emotional 9-year-old but if Phoebe, Patty and Dr Bliss were the best in dealing with Helga, it was cause they were calm and collected during times of crisis and while they did empathise with her feelings, they also separated themselves enough to be rational. Right now being angry, sad and or overly helpful in an effort to please was not the key.

So she waited. She heard the sniffling pause as though the person doing so felt something was off, then a small amount of movement before Ophelia landed next to her neatly.

A few leaves fell on the ground as she did, some landing on the girl’s hair, but she didn’t look like
she cared. Helga saw that her school pinafore looked scuffed up where she had climbed the tree, and her knee-high socks looked like they had seen better days, bits of bark fragments clinging on to the elastic.

The girl herself didn’t look like she was at her best either. Her eyes were pink and looked like they were rubbed hard. Her cheeks were a flushed red, something her pale complexion brought out. Her brow was so furrowed Helga could have sworn they could burrow down and become permanent fixtures on the girl’s face. Right now, they were focused on Helga, as she stood up and stared at the adult currently sitting down and looking up at her.

“WHY haven’t you said anything! “ Ophelia yelled. “ It’s been 3 minutes! I’m in OBVIOUS distress! Why are you even here if you’re not here to comfort me or something!”

Ah, the entitled Z generation. Such fun. Helga, while obviously still concerned for her niece, could still afford to be a little exasperated. However, she was very sure she had done the same thing to other people many times, including on Dr Bliss.

One case that fit this occasion best was when Helga, angry and helpless at age 11, had burst into her office screaming about having to move to a whole different state. Dr Bliss didn’t do anything beyond listening intently and looking at her, leaving her notebook aside and looking infuriatingly calm.

In her fury, she had thrown a load of accusations at Dr Bliss, including one where she called her out for not even saying a comforting word to her after her spouting 5 minutes of ranting about hating her family for even moving and that Olga was coming with them, and how dare they even consider moving.

Dr Bliss sighed and then told Helga something that had frankly stuck with her for a long time, and got her so stunned that she had sat down on the couch and cried, with Dr Bliss hugging her throughout.

She looked at Ophelia and used the same words that were told to her years and years before.“ You were upset, and you’re not the type to be comforted by easy platitudes, you’re too smart for that. Telling you everything was going to be alright without knowing what happened would be absolutely stupid, and I respect you enough to not do that to you.”

Silence. Ophelia mulled over her words before she sighed and sat down next to her. “ I hate rational adults.” She grumbled.

Smilingly, Helga asked,” Never met any?”

“ Nope. In school, they’re more concerned about bureaucracy or something, and it’s all about the tape.” Ophelia grumbled, shifting a little trying to find a good spot to sit comfortably.

“Well I don’t know about you, but that’s kinda shit adulting,” Helga said before realising that she had used the word shit in front of her nine-year-old niece.

She quickly turned her head around to look at the girl, “ Don’t use that.” She ordered. “ I can use it, I’m an adult-“

“ It’s fine,” Ophelia said wearily, running her hand over her messily tied up hair and brushing away the leaves. “ I’m in a Catholic school with boys. I’ve heard worse.”
She rubbed her eyes hard, making them redder with friction and irritation. “I’m a mess.” She muttered. “Mother Mary Clarence is going to scream at me about cleanliness again—”

“Your school is run by nuns?” Helga asked, a little aghast. She had heard of the school when she was a kid, of course, but only in passing. She supposed it made sense it was run by nuns.

“Man you’re really not from around here huh,” Ophelia said, exasperatedly. “Our school is famous in Hillwood for having the strictest nuns around. We even won a Tony award for a play that was based on the strictness of nuns or something like that.”

Helga opened her mouth to remark that nothing of what Ophelia said had made sense, then she decided to just take things as they were. After all, Pigeon Man once flew to Paris using his pigeons, and that defied all logic sense, but it worked for him. Other things could happen.

They gazed out, looking at the sky. No one spoke for a while until Ophelia did.

“I ... didn’t do good there.” She said.

“Oh?” Helga said blandly, though inside she was eager to find out what had happened between the two kids. Partly because she wanted the best for Ophelia but mostly because Helga was a busybody who liked to throw her hand in many places just to see what would happen.

“He was being an absolute ninny!” Snapped Ophelia. “I turned up at lunchtime at our usual spot—”

“You’ve never met before, you don’t have a usual spot!” Helga replied sardonically. She couldn’t help herself, it had to be said.

“Doesn’t matter!” Ophelia waved a hand. “I asked him if he liked my painting and he looked like he had no idea what I was talking about!”

Helga frowned. She was so sure that the kid received the painting, she had even seen him open the Manila envelope in question and everything. “He didn’t receive it?” She asked.

“No, he did! “ Ophelia retorted, springing to her feet. “He didn’t even care about the painting! He then asked me if I was the wasabi gummy dealer, and then tried to shove money at me, and when I asked if he even liked the painting, he was all, ‘I guess…though my brother says anime is for weebo’s’ or something and it was all, WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?!” She whirled around to face Helga as she finished her sentence.

Silence.

Helga raised an eyebrow at her. “Do you even know what weebo means?”

”Well….no.” Ophelia looked down fiercely at her feet. “But he looked at it like it wasn’t a good thing and I just got so…”

She finished that sentence with a scream of aggravation and kicked the trunk. A few leaves fell as she did so.

Helga could relate. She had done that multiple times in her youth with regards to her own crush and her own emotions.
"And it was like…I don’t know!" Ophelia threw her hands up in frustration. “He didn’t even like the painting! All he cared about was the stupid wasabi candy! And then he just brushed it aside like it was…nothing! I worked on the painting for ages! AGES! I skipped classes just to do it.”

"Again, concentrate on your academic performance…” Helga winced, dimly remembering how she didn’t take that advice back then and spent ages daydreaming and monologuing about her crush on Arnold. It was a wonder she even managed to keep her academics up.

“AND IN THE END!” Ophelia practically howled, “HE DIDN’T EVEN KNOW WHAT I WAS TALKING ABOUT. ALL HE CARED ABOUT WAS THE DAMN CANDY! I TOLD HIM I LOVED HIM, AND HE LOOKED LIKE I KILLED HIS CAT. HE DIDN’T SAY ANYTHING!”

She finished that sentence with an aggravated screech and collapsed against the trunk of the tree, an arm cushioning her face as she leaned face down against the trunk.

"I HATE HAVING FEELINGS, I DON’T LIKE FEELING LIKE THIS! AND I WANT A REFUND AT THE FEELINGS STORE!” Helga could hear her scream, albeit muffled.

It was, in many ways, heartbreaking and funny and yet so relatable. Helga was pretty sure she had yelled that out at some point many a time. However, she wasn’t going to tell Ophelia that. Instead, she sighed and produced a napkin from her pocket. Phoebe had, in various points of her life, always reminded Helga that good hygiene was important, and having packets of tissues around proved effective for all occasions. She silently thanked Phoebe for instilling that habit in her, it made her feel a little more adult.

She passed the tissue to Ophelia, who looked at it, then back at Helga with suspicion. She then took the napkin from her delicately and blew her nose a little less.

"I know the feeling…” She started.

"No, you don’t!” Ophelia snapped, white-hot sharp anger sparking. “You’re a dumb adult who isn’t married! You don’t know what love is!”

Wow, that was pretty shady for a nine-year-old. However, Helga took it in stride because if her instincts were correct, the girl wasn’t doing it out of actual hate. “Firstly: Hurtful. Secondly, small pint- I told you about my crush thing yesterday, right? I’ve been there-”

A small snort told her that Ophelia thought differently, but hey, she was listening. That was a good sign.

“Well, I didn’t want to tell you this in case I was wrong…but well. You’re right there. What I felt for my old crush back in elementary school? That wasn’t love.”

Now she had caught Ophelia’s attention. “That’s not right,” Ophelia said slowly.

“What?” Helga said, a little jokingly. “I just said you were right. I would have expected you to be all gloaty.”

The little girl looked a little stunned. “That can’t be right!” She cried. “But…you and him…you said it was exactly like me and…” she didn’t seem like she was able to actually say Freddy’s name out, so she made several hand gestures signifying a person.
Helga, luckily, was sort of familiar with flailing angry hand gestures. “Well, yeah.” She sighed. “Yesterday I told you I moved from this place to a whole new state for awhile right?”

Ophelia tilted her head, looking at her warily. “Ye...s?”

“Well, after I left, and the years afterwards, I had time to figure out my feelings, go around and actually meet more people...it took me ages and lots of people talking to me to realize that I was probably too obsessive with the person, and placed way too many expectations and hope for redemption on this one face, this one person I wasn’t even sure I even properly knew. Oh sure, I stalked him and knew what he loved and hated-”

”You told me stalking was bad!” cried Ophelia, a little accusatorily.

“I don’t want you making the same mistakes I did!” Helga protested, laughingly. “I was probably worse than you were-”

”Psh, liar.” Ophelia rolled her eyes. “I once got a drone to follow him around a whole day, and managed to convince him that the drone was his new pet, and we had adventures together-”

”.... And....that story is something I want to know later, despite my better judgement.” Helga slowly admitted. Then she shook her head to clear her mind. “That’s not the point! This isn’t a contest on who’s a better stalker-”

”Cause I’d win-”

”Again, not a contest-”

”Cause I’m a winner-”

”Okay, listen to me!” Helga laughed in spite of herself. “Look...this thing. Maybe it was a good thing this happened.”

Ophelia looked aghast. “I thought you were on my side!” she wailed. Helga had to suppress a smile at this.

“I am! “ she reassured her. “I’m imparting a life lesson here-”

“Crushing my dreams is a life lesson?” Ophelia screeched. “I’ve been in love with this guy since.... since....”

She let her hands collapse to her sides, her face looked like it had finally discovered the magnitude of the problem. Helga sighed.

“I got that way too.” She said slowly. “It took me... I would say maybe ...a good eight years to realise I was using him as a crutch thanks to the help of a good support network. Then it took another four years before I realised that I was properly over my obsession. It didn’t help that for a long period of time in my teens, I kept holding on to him as my saviour, even after I started dating other people-“

Ophelia was staring at her like she had grown another head. “You cheated on your dream guy?” she asked, aghast.

“I was never unfaithful? “ Helga said, a little unsure where the conversation was going. “He was never mine to begin with and it didn’t make sense to keep someone as my own, especially since we never said we were in love. People aren’t things, Ophelia.”
Ophelia looked crestfallen and Helga sighed, feeling a little sad at how young Ophelia looked at this moment: she may have talked a big game with her snark and eloquence but underneath it all, she was still a nine year old.

"Did I…scare him off?" She whispered, a little sad.

This was extremely painful. She was pretty sure she asked herself that question many times throughout the years. She decided to answer truthfully as she could. “Ophelia, love isn’t stalking someone and finding out all their likes and dislikes and putting in all the effort in something that the other party knows nothing about. Love is…”

She scanned her head for the best signs of love people had shown her in her life. Most of it was platonic, but the best type of love she had ever received in her life.

An umbrella selflessly given in kindergarten to shield her from the rain.

The hug her mom had given her once, a little distracted, but still warm.

When Nilanjana held her in that bathroom during the funeral.

The look of love Phoebe had on her face when she once tearfully told her that she loved her at Phoebe’s graduation.

When Dr Bliss came to her own graduation and she saw her in the audience, leaning back and smiling when she first got her degree.

The time Patty sighed and said, “You’re not that bad, Pataki, we’ll be okay.”

When Eugene jumped from the stage at one point in his performance so that he could link hands with Helga and do an impromptu can-can, he in full drag and her in glitter.

That time a few days ago where Helga and Arnold were sitting at breakfast, just chatting, sunlight streaming and hitting his hair just so-

She refocused herself back to where she was and looked back at Ophelia. “I think love is overrated. Especially romantic love. It can last generations, or it can last a few years. Love is the nitty gritty between two people, it can be the expanse of cities between groups of people, it can be best friends having each other’s backs forever. It can be…” she paused. “It can be a boy offering you an umbrella on the worst day of your life. A small act of kindness.”

The look Ophelia gave her at that reply could wither forests. “You gave me a whole speech about how love is basically friendship?” She spat that word out like she was swallowing tacks. “Friends are dumb! Nobody needs friends!” She turned her back to Helga and made a move to leave.

Helga raised an eyebrow at her retreating back. “Hasn’t anyone wanted to be your friend before, Ophelia?”

That got her to stop and twist around.

“I have like tons of friends!” the little girl yelled. “I have…” she stopped and her eyes dropped a little. “I have no one!” she snapped. “I don’t like anyone! I’ve been following and looking out for
Freddie for so long I haven’t had the time!”

Helga gave a low whistle. “Damn. Okay, not even your classmates?”

“At this age? Kids only care about things like stickers, jump rope, stickers, stickers, stickers, that guy with the hair that sings things, stickers, STICKERS!” she screeched. “I hate kids, and I’m a kid!”

That was…vaguely familiar, Helga smirked. She missed those days of hating the idiots around her.

“Look, I don’t know what you’ve been doing in that hoity-toity school of yours, but I refuse to believe you have no friends there.” Helga folded her arms and looked back at her.

Ophelia snorted. “Oh yeah?” She challenged. “I can prove you so wrong on that! I have no friends, I have 10 twitter followers, and all of them are relatives, on dad’s side, no less, no one knows anything about mom’s—”

She went on for a bit, but Helga didn’t listen, her mind caught up on the fact that apparently, Helga’s own sister had never told the kids anything about her.

It was definitely possible, of course. Frankly, Helga wouldn’t have suspected anything different.

Didn’t stop the feeling of loneliness dropping onto her like a net.

”….and the teachers in my kindergarten could never find me a buddy to go to the bathroom with me- are you even listening!” yelled Ophelia.

Helga rolled her eyes again, but she was glad that she had the distraction. This managed to get her back on track on what she wanted to say.

”Okay, first off, lies. After this whole adventure, I think you and I are already going to be friends.”

The look Ophelia gave her was one of wariness. “I doubt it,” she stated flatly.

”No no, I mean it!” Helga protested. “Despite the stalking, I think you’re kinda cool, Ophelia- That is a very long name, by the way, don’t you have anything shorter?”

“Hey, if you’re too lazy to say three syllables, I suggest you don’t be an adult.” Ophelia retorted.

”Just for that, I’m calling you Ophie, or Phi Phi-”

”How dare you!”

”Secondly,” Helga continued, steamrolling past that issue. “Friends are really very important for your life development. If it were not for friends, I wouldn’t have found out how much of an asshole I am—”

”You said asshole-” The newly renamed Phi Phi stated sulkily.

”I’m an adult, I have a license for that.” Helga breezed past that. No one said she had to be an absolutely perfect role-model, let her have that moment. “If it weren’t for my friends helping me and guiding me through things in life, I wouldn’t be as well-adjusted, I wouldn’t be as happy as I am now, and my friends helped me in things when my family failed in. My friends gave me a good support network when I had none and thanks to them, I am alive, and I am slowly working on how
to be happier.’

She then made sure Phi was looking at her when she said the next line.” And, Phi, I mean it in the nicest of ways...but you are a stuck up brat. But so was I. And people didn’t give up on that when I was an ass. So if you’re okay… I think you and I will be good friends.”

Phi looked at her with a mixture of wariness and what looked like a tiny bit of hope. “ Were they the ones who helped you through your first love?” she asked, pretending to look nonchalant while still looking every bit eager to hear the answer.

Helga nodded. “ I think I would be alone and still pining for a guy who hasn’t thought about me since 6th grade if not for distance and moving on.” She said. She was very relieved at the fact that her friends got her back, and it could not be said enough that she was relieved that Arnold still wanted to be friends despite her weird moods back then…and even now, she thought, inwardly cringing. She really had to apologize again so he wouldn’t feel so guilty about what happened this morning.

Ophelia looked silent for a while. Then she rolled her eyes and reached her hand out. “ Gimme,” she said in a flat tone.

Helga stared at her. “ Whaddya mean,” she replied, matching the flat tone to Ophelia’s own. Hey, she was good at mimicry, might as well use it to her best advantage.

“ Gimme your phone, I want to input my digits okay?” Ophelia snapped. “ I’m not going to text you much, and it’s a fruitless cause…but if you want a chat…I suppose I could let you chatter at me and telling me how messed up you are as an adult.”

Helga smiled. That, she could deal with.

“ Look, I know I messed up there, but there’s really no need to chaperone me like I’m some sort of maiden that needs a chastity belt-” Phi said mutinously, as Helga and she were bundled up in a taxi on the way back to Ophelia’s private school.

Helga tutted. “ No, no, you said it, we’re friends. Friends look out for each other. Also, friends don’t let friends miss out on educational endeavours, and as an adult, I will be …effed,” she managed to alter her words so as not to swear in front of the nine-year-old, “...if I don’t make sure a kid like you gets back safe. Stranger danger and all that.”

She had texted Arnold a few minutes ago, telling him that she wouldn’t be around the rest of the afternoon and that she would meet him and Gerald at a bar later. He replied, looking confused, but gamely saying that he would text her the address later. She had to smile a little at how confusedly cute Arnold could be sometimes.

” Again, I’m rich, and it’s barely 1, no one would be missing me from lunch break-” Phi grumbled, looking very much the surly tween. Helga was pretty sure she had time-travelled to steal Helga Pataki’s very own patented grumpy slumped child resting pose. It was either that or genes were very strong in the family.

” And that is why I am making sure you get back to school.” Helga chided. It was rare that she got to discipline a kid close to her, and the kid being her niece, of all people. “ You already lied to me about
going back to school earlier this morning, and honestly, I want to spend time with you, we need a post-bonding session and this taxi ride could be it.”

Ophelia grumbled, but Helga knew she was doing the right thing.

As she and Phi Phi talked, the background that could be seen out the window shifted from shabbier urban city developments to a sleek, more upscale town. It was clear that whatever Ophelia’s school was, it was the creme de la creme of schools, situated in a very posh neighbourhood. Even the delis looked cleaner, and she was sure she saw a sign advertising a deconstructed pigs-in-a-blanket set in a cafe.

How the rich live. She thought, a little enviously. Back when FTi was about to tear down the neighbourhood, if she had stuck by her earlier desire for money, she could now be staying in a neighbourhood like this, living on her own in a penthouse apartment, eating caviar on avocado toast.

Eh, Eugene was a great roommate, and she would have been rather self-destructive if she had lived alone in a luxury apartment. Being rich and alone in a marble palace was no match to letting a drunk roommate and his drag friends in at 3 am in the morning and spending the night up with them laughing while they drunkenly tried to do all the dance moves to Las Ketchup.

It still didn’t hurt to dream though.

”No one will know that I’m missing!” Ophelia protested. “Honestly! My friends do it all the time, the school security is lax as hell.”

They pulled up outside the gates of Church of the Holy Infant Jesus St Theresa’s Private School just as Helga looked out the window and saw a bunch of worried looking adults crowding around. “I… wouldn’t count on that…”

Ophelia shuffled to the window to see what the older woman was talking about. “CRIPES!” she screeched. “It’s my uncles.”

“ Well, looks like something’s going on…” Helga said, looking out the window to assess the situation. Three men and what looked like a woman were standing outside the gate. Two of the men, blonde and tanned, looked aggressively on as the third, a weedier, shorter man with glasses, was pleading with them, probably to see reason. She could not get a good look at the woman.

”Ah, no, what do I do, what do I do!” Ophelia fretted in the backseat and Helga, looking back at the panicking nine-year-old, decided to take matters into her own hands.

”Look, I’ll make up a story, and they’ll believe me cause I’m an adult and I’ll vouch for you so hard they’ll be eating out of the palm of my hands,” Helga said as she paid the cabbie, who pocketed the money with an easy grin and a wave goodbye as they opened the door to leave the cab.

”You mean it?” Ophelia said, hesitant, and not willing to leave the cab in any way.

”You won’t get in trouble, I promise.” Helga smoothly said. “I’m good at lying, and since we’re friends, I promise I’ll tell you how to do it after this event is over.”

Ophelia still looked wary but grudgingly got out the door.

The two of them walked towards the entrance, towards the group in question. One of the tall blonde
men spotted them as they got near, and he gestured towards the other man, who was also tall and blonde like he was, and had a strong family resemblance that it was clear they were brothers. The weedier saw them too and looked so relieved that it was like Helga was bringing him a miracle.

”Hi!” Helga said, giving them a toothy grin. “I am so sorry about this, but I took Ophelia out of school today, and I should have cleared it with the school office, and the girl was beside herself with worry-”

The woman in the group turned around to face Helga and Helga’s voice dried up instantly, her face froze and her mouth now dry with unexpected tension.

She should have seen this coming.

After all, it made sense to contact the parents of a child who was probably missing from school, right?

”Ah, Helga,” said Olga Pataki flatly, as her face slid from stunned silence to slow, tense anger.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Welp, that took awhile.

Sorry.

CW: angst, family troubles.

Ophelia looked between the two of them, confused. “You know each other?”

Before Helga could react, however, Olga’s face snapped back to her Stepford mom face, one Helga was sure she put on for the society pages. The smile was all teeth, all gleam, all softness. The only thing that contrasted that was the hardness in Olga’s eyes.

“Oh of course!” Olga exclaimed in a too loud voice, “Mr Hogbottom, I am terribly sorry, I completely forgot! Helga asked me earlier today whether she could take Ophelia out since she was in town, and I must have been such a silly, being busy with the charity and all. It had completely slipped my mind to tell her to go to the office and it must have caused so much worry for everyone involved!”

If Helga didn’t know any better, Olga was the picture of abject misery mixed with sincere shame and sorrow. Of course, the little gleam in her eye told a different story, one only those who grew up with the woman would recognise.

One of the brothers opened his mouth to speak but the other brother slapped him in the back, speaking over him loudly. “Well, what a silly goose you are, Olga! Forgetting about such an important detail! You’ll be forgetting your head next! “

He spoke with a weird accent, like a mishmash of an Upper-Class accent forcibly mashed with an American’s view of what a British upper-class accent was like. The two blondes laughed loudly, and a little obnoxiously.

“Well, in this case, we shouldn’t have to worry about sueing the school for negligence, then, Piggity-Higgity!” Chortled the first man, and the name made the weedier man blush. “Close call too! All the Johnsons go to this school, we would so hate to use our power as an Established Name to have to sue the school. Why the little nuns wouldn’t be able to get new frocks to hide their stubbly legs with!”

Helga was silently fuming at how rude this man was. This man was one of the worst people she had ever met.

“ And you know that they need the habits, of course, though I wouldn’t mind getting near one of them old biddies and woaaaaaaah!” yelled the other brother. He spoke with the same mishmash accent the first man did and punctuated the end with a vulgar thrust of his hips.

Scratch that, he was tied with his brother for Worst Human Being on Earth.

Olga made it a point to laugh at the joke, while the weedy man looked aghast at the audacity of the
men. Ophelia, of course, was confused about what was happening, and Helga wanted to do something, anything to avoid this train wreck happening in front of her.

Of course, just when she was about to quietly move away from this, Olga had snaked her arm forward towards her shoulder and grabbed a hold of her, encircling her tight in a way that made sure Helga had no way to leave. To anyone not paying much attention, it would look like a sisterly embrace.

“Mr Hammersmith, this is my baby sister, Helga Pataki, who’s in town for a surprise visit, showed up at our doorstep and everything!” Olga cooed.

Helga, who was tense, only dimly registered the fact that Olga had called the weedy man by an entirely different name (wasn’t his name Mr Hogbottom before?). She was mostly focused on Phi, who tensed up when she heard Helga’s last name.

“Pataki?” Phi slowly said, slowly testing out each syllable as the fact sank in. “Sister?” She said with distaste as she narrowed her eyes, “You manipulative little –”

“Ophelia! Language no no!” Trilled Olga quickly, grabbing a hold of her daughter. “So it’s obvious that it was all a misunderstanding, that’s all, there’s no need to raise such an alarm after all!”

Helga, despite having her shoulder now gripped in a tight hold, had the sense that Olga was making this story up to cover for something.

This, of course, went over the weedy man’s head. “Of course, Mrs Pataki-Johnson, we will let this slide. However, we cannot ignore the fact that Ophelia has skipped classes before-”

“Yeah, but she hasn’t hit the limit of demerits, has she?” Olga said, happily and forcefully sweeping that particular concern under the rug. “Thus, I think under the circumstances, we can and should let this slide!”

Somehow the forcefulness of that statement was a signal that the entire debacle was over, despite the weedy man’s look of frustration. Olga turned to her daughter, whose face was slowly shutting down, and went, “Well, since everything is all done, we should get everything back to normal! Ophelia, get back to class, we wouldn’t want your little field trip to affect your studies!”

She said the words, “field trip” with a little bit of derision, something that only Helga caught. Helga tried to say goodbye to Ophelia, but the girl ignored her as she skulked back to the school entrance, without even a look back at Helga or her cheerfully oblivious mother.

Helga sighed inwardly. She knew it was bound to happen but that didn’t shield her from the hurt that yet another blood relative was throwing her aside because she did something wrong.

She also didn’t know why Olga was still gripping her shoulder.

It was beginning to hurt.

“Mr Hogwarts, I would love to stay and chat, but you know, I haven’t seen my baby sister in ages, so it would just be super amazing if we left right now so the sisterly bonding could begin!” Olga punctuated the sentence with a squeezing hug. Helga supposed it was meant to look loving and sweet but it came off as a little patronising and an obvious brush off.

She was right; as soon as the weedy man tried to open his mouth again, Olga had turned around and walked off, dragging the confused Helga with her. The two men followed along high diving and whooping.
They nearly reached the roadside when the weedier man caught up with them. Unbeknownst to them, he had been chasing behind them and was now huffing badly, holding what seemed to be a stitch at his side, his hair flying about wildly.

“Ms Pataki—” he gasped out. “You’re the author, aren’t you?”

Helga barely had time to nod before he thrust out a small rectangular card at her. Apparently, he was not holding a stitch but was, in fact, looking for what appeared to be a name card, where the name Dean Rex Higgins-Smyth was printed in a neat Times New Roman font.

Olga, who was still grasping on to Helga, gestured that their ride was here and Helga was to go along with them, so hurry up with the guy already. Helga took the card and barely had a chance to yell, “Thanks!” before she was forcibly pushed into the car by Olga.

It had been a few minutes since Helga had been hard-handledly escorted to the car by Olga and she still had no idea why she was there. As soon as she got in, she opened her mouth to protest but Olga, who was seated next to her, locked eyes with her and mouthed, “No.” Her face had changed from its usual glowy, chirpy Stepford Wife mode for a brief moment.

Before Helga had a chance to ask, Olga had immediately gone back to simpering mode, and she started talking to DudeTwit One and DudeTwit Two about things like what they were going to do later, and something boring like stock exchanges.

Attempts to get her attention through intense staring did not work. Neither did the patented Pataki Scowl, as Olga was happily and very determinedly not looking in her direction, so Helga huffed, and spent the rest of the car-ride staring out the window. She wasn’t even sure why she was sitting in the same car as her estranged older sister Olga and her two brothers-in-law.

Also technically, it wasn’t a car. All four of them were currently spaced out pretty far apart in the backseat of a stretch limo, which appeared to have a mini fridge and glass holders, while the driver drove them back to the Vanderbilt-Johnson residence.

One of the brothers opened the fridge door and got two cans of what seemed to be imported beer while passing Olga a glass bottle. Olga took the bottle gratefully and popped the cap, downing the contents in one gulp.

“Oh my, that does hit the spot!” Olga said, looking for all the world like a weary, tired mother. Helga rolled her eyes a little.

“It must be a challenge, ain’t it, Olga?” said DudeTwit One sympathetically. DudeTwit Two snorted as he raised his can in agreement.

“She’s going to be …difficult, that’s for sure, that one,” he said, as DudeTwit One laughed.Olga didn’t reply to that, which irked Helga just a little. Sure, Ophelia was a challenging kid, but she was Olga’s daughter. Surely, she would defend her own daughter? Or even her own parenting skills?

“I did tell you though,” DudeTwit One said, waggling a teasing finger at Olga, “When you said that she stomped out of the room screaming because you told her off about having friends on the internet… I had my suspicions, you know.”

“And always listening to that weird Asian nonsense.” The other one loftily scoffed. “What’s wrong
with good old English songs? Does she think she’s too good for us?’”

Helga bristled at that: Ophelia had, in passing, mentioned her love for Korean boybands and while Helga had teased her a little about her crushes, she respected her music tastes. Hearing this dismissal of her favourite niece was absolutely shitty. She made a passing glance at Olga to see her reaction.

When Olga still didn’t respond beyond a wave of her hand, Helga finally blurted out, “She seems like a great kid!”

All three other members in the car turned to look at her.

Helga, squirming because of the attention, defensively retorted, “What? I can appreciate a good person!”

DudeTwit One was the first to snort. “Well, yeah, but you’ve never shown your face until now, you don’t know more than we do.”

And damn, DudeTwit One had a point.

Didn’t mean Helga didn’t want to shove his face into the concrete.

At this point, Olga, who was sipping from her own bottle, realised that Helga hadn’t had her own drink. The exclamations from her older sister bemoaning the fact that she had forgotten her manners made Helga want to roll her eyes a little bit this meant that the interaction between sisters wasn’t awkward. And it was a little nice of someone in the family to fuss over her like that.

When Olga passed her the bottle of Kombucha tea, Helga, in her willingness to look like she was being civil to her Sister, opened the bottle and took a sip-

Only for her to spit the concoction out.

“CRIMINEY CHRIST STICKS, what IS that?” Helga gasped., trying to get rid of the taste in her mouth. How was it bitter and BUBBLY at the same time?

The DudeTwits roared with laughter at that, while Olga looked on, with concerned eyes. “It’s Tropical Summer Kombucha! With Pineapple and Hibiscus and Mint-”

“That might be the worst thing I’ve tasted in my life, and I’ve tried all of my friend’s attempts at remaking Guinness from his home.” Helga cried. “Is there anything in that fridge that isn’t any bougie crap?”

And the mildly disapproving look was back on Olga’s face again, but this did not faze Helga in the slightest. DudeTwit One chortled while DudeTwit Two took another can of beer out of the fridge and passed it to Helga. She accepted it gratefully. Anything to get rid of the taste of whatever that was in her mouth.

The driveway that the limo was now pulling into was long, and Helga figured it would lead to a really big, very posh house.

She really didn’t prepare herself for the opulence.
“What the -” Helga gawked as they all got out of the car. “Isn’t this the Gatsby House Leonardo
DiWhathisname had in that movie?!”


“As if!” DudeTwit Two rolled his eyes.

"That shit is way smaller!”

“I know, and all they have is a small pier with one boat-”

“We have our own island across the jetty-”

“And our own lighthouse-”

“And our own coffee shop inside the lighthouse!”

While the brothers were chiming in with their apparent disregard of the house, Helga ignored them
and took a proper look at where she was. Rhonda had showed her bits and pieces of the houses the
various Vanderbilt-Johnsons owned but she didn’t have any of Olga’s own house so while Helga
was prepared for the opulence, she wasn’t expecting this level of bougie. So much white all over.
She wondered how the house managed to stay so clean on the outside. There weren’t leaves or grime
anywhere on the house.

They even had their own hedge maze, Helga marvelled enviously as she spied one, located far away
on her left side. No wonder the driveway up to the house from the gate was so long.

Olga, who had been giving the driver instructions on picking up the children afterwards, finally
turned to yell at the DudeTwits. “If you all don’t mind, baby sis and I really need to catch up!”

And she grabbed Helga’s hand and led her up the stairs to the main house, ignoring the yells of the
two men who were yelling something rather inaudible. Helga didn’t care to know what.

All she knew was that Olga was taking her somewhere and she had to be on her guard.

What if, god forbid, she was taking her to see Big Bob?

That was honestly something she didn’t really want to think about right now.

Instead, she chose to focus on the interior of the house. A man, who had opened the door,
murmured, “Mrs Johnson” as Olga strode in, Helga walking a little slower behind her.

“Shall I prepare your afternoon Kombacha, ma’am?” the man asked politely, looking over Helga
with quiet interest.

“Yes please, Niles!” Olga yelled back. “And my guest would have the same!”

Helga shuddered, and the man, who noticed it, gave her a sympathetic look. “I’ll just bring up some
normal tea for you.”

” Can you make it Irish?” muttered Helga.

“ What?” said the man, looking taken aback.
“Just…yeah, tea is fine.” Helga replied hastily, and she went after her sister down the hallway where she disappeared to.

She finally caught up to Olga at the end of the hallway, where she was waiting in front of a door. Olga gave her a small smile and opened the door, walking in without waiting for Helga to react.

The younger blonde walked in and blinked.

She had somehow managed to step back in time onto the old living room at the old Pataki place.

There was the old baby grand piano that used to sit in their old house in Hillwood.

The moss, jade green wallpaper.

All of Olga’s old rosettes, framed certificates and trophies were all around the room.

The sofa where Helga used to lie on reading comic books and slurping Yahoo Soda.

There was the old armchair her dad used to favour and for a moment Helga had a brief wave of nostalgia wash over her. She could swear she was a kid again, coming back home from a long day at school, finding her mother slumped over the back of the couch taking her alcohol-induced naps, and her father, in all his bluster, complaining about how the media disgraced veterans like him and his friends in ‘Nam.

She half-expected him to be there in the chair, getting up to greet Helga and loom over her in his hulking form, arms akimbo, a scowl forming on his lips and his brow furrowed hard.

But then Helga blinked and the old, imaginary form of Big Bob Pataki slipped away. So did her nostalgia-tinted glasses, and she began to remember that she was not in the Hillwood brownstone house.

All the furniture was vastly superior, for one thing.

The green wallpaper was patterned with a subtle green gold sheen, something that looked way more expensive than the plain green they had before.

The old baby grand piano looked newer, somehow, and Helga would bet the royalties of Umbrella Girl Volume Two that it was all new.

The sofa, the armchair? They were all new, because Helga vaguely remembered spilling a drink on a cushion at one point and the stain was never have been able to come out.

There were no stains on this couch.

It was creepy as hell and Helga was about to say so when she saw a photo that made her stop in her tracks.

It was a framed photo of the time the Patakis went to a photo studio to pose for a family portrait, before they left Hillwood. Olga was dressed in her graduation robes, the Valedictorian sash hung around her shoulders. She was posed with her arms around her parents, Big Bog beaming proudly and wearing his second-best suit and a tie.

Miriam looked better in the photo, Helga remembered that she had not drunk anything before the
portrait was taken, which meant she was a little more clear-eyed but also a little subdued. She wore her best dress and her eyes shone through her glasses.

She looked at her 12-year-old self and snorted. That was the beginning of an awkward, angry stage for her. Zits appearing everywhere, her blonde hair sticking out even more, dressed for some reason in a ruffly pink dress with long sleeves and a pink ribbon in her hair. She had stopped wearing pink that year but for the portrait, her mother had insisted she wear this dress for the photo.

She didn’t look good in the photo. She looked angry. They had spent what seemed to be an hour and a half just taking test shots and the photographer had insisted on taking a bunch of photos of Olga alone.

Helga remembered that she had rolled her eyes plenty during the shoot. In a way, the photograph accurately portrayed what they were as a family.

Also, in a weird way, it was hilarious.

Olga had, using her resources and money, managed to painstakingly recreate the Pataki Living Room in every bit of its glory. She must have really loved the childhood homestead to do this.

It was kinda sweet, Helga thought.

In a fucking messed up way.

But still.

Olga stood by the door as Helga explored. The earlier inscrutable look on her face had disappeared only to be replaced with a look of uncertainty and dare Helga said it…joy?

She had to say something, clearly, Olga wanted her to say something to respond to the bizarre replica of the living room. “It’s… familiar, that’s for sure.” she said, lamely.

Olga heaved a sigh, and she looked a hell load relieved. “That’s good! “she exclaimed. She sat down on the green couch, so reminiscent of the old one, and patted the couch seat next to her. Helga gave her a look of suspicion but sat down. She felt extremely uncomfortable and extremely anxious. Being in a room exactly like the one she spent her childhood in was making her feel unsettled. A burning feeling felt like it was about to erupt from her chest and it brought back feelings of wanting to run right there and then.

She took a deep breath and tried to loosen her shoulders. She had spent a lot of time away from Hillwood, the old house, and from Olga and Big Bob. Thanks to a lot of therapy and friendships and relationships, she had managed to work through a lot of her anger issues and had explored her past as much as she could. She was doing better than before.

She did pretty okay the last encounter with Olga in a public setting. She could clearly do the same right now with Olga in a replica of her old living room.

Maybe.

She could do this right?

The awkward tension in the air was getting to her. Olga hadn’t spoken a word yet and she just kept looking at Helga, as though she was waiting for her to say something.
“So…” Helga said slowly, letting the syllable roll off her tongue. She was really getting kind of worried about the situation she was letting herself in.

What did Olga want? She didn’t trust Olga as far as she could throw her. Any chance of that was erased when Olga rejected her during the funeral and when she denounced her for kissing Nilanjana. Someone who clearly hated her for who she was wouldn’t give her a house willingly and with no conditions.

The woman in question was now looking down on her lap. She looked a little unsure herself, which Helga found a little weird. What did Olga have to worry about?

“I’m glad you’re here, Helga.” Olga said genuinely. “We have a lot to talk about.”

The statement, and how sincerely it was delivered, made Helga want to snap at her but she held her tongue. She wanted to figure out exactly what Olga wanted and getting defensive immediately would defeat her purpose in keeping her cards to herself and her emotions in check.

It was hard though. The burning feeling was trying to escape her chest and if she didn’t say anything, it felt like she would burst. Nothing made sense. Wasn’t Olga angry at her supposedly taking Phi out of school? What was going on?

What she settled for instead was a raised eyebrow, a look of contempt, and a small, “Oh?” while cocking her head.

Perfect. She could pretend she didn’t care about what was happening in front of her. She could play a character. This wasn’t anything new.

“Well, yes!” Olga said. “Honestly, I didn’t realise how much of a relief it was to see you with Ophelia, though you really shouldn’t be taking my daughter out of class like that, cause I don’t want her following …”

She trailed off at that point but Helga knew what she meant. She didn’t want Ophelia to end up like her.

Olga must have seen her face shutter down because she quickly said, “I don’t blame you though!”

She was totally lying.

"I mean, it makes sense that Ophelia would inherit some of that…inventive spiritedness…not that it’s wrong to be so…flighty… at that age-”

Oh god, her temper was threatening to rise up and snap at her.

“The fact that the two of you have met and like each other is a total relief! Of course, if you would just reduce the field trips a little, maybe I won’t be so mad!” Olga laughed, as though the thought of what she said amused her, and she leaned in to place a loving pat on Helga’s shoulder.

Okay, the condescension was killing her.

“What the hell do you want?” Helga finally snapped. “The house, me being here, you being…NICE. Cut the shit and tell me what you are doing?!”

Olga looked confused. “Why, baby sister, I-”
“And don’t call me that!” Helga snarled. “I haven’t been your baby sister since the day you helped
Big Bob kick me out of the house, just because for once I was getting some comfort from someone
who actually cared about me!”

Olga was wincing. “Oh, baby sis-Helga.” She quickly corrected herself at Helga’s glare. “I have
thought about that day so many times, and many a time, I have regretted what happened…between
us that day. We shouldn’t have been fighting when …”

Olga had stopped herself at that point.

Helga rolled her eyes. “When Miriam died, yes.” she said, impatiently.

“You know I don’t like addressing Mommy and Daddy by their first names.” Olga said, chastisingly.
“It’s disrespectful-”

” Oh, oh really? Maybe I’ll do that the day they start acting like parents!!” Helga snapped back.

Inwardly she was panicking. What was she doing? Her emotions were bubbling over, she was angry
that her whole body coursed with energy, and she was so jumpy she wanted to take a swing at
someone.

Mostly at Olga’s perfect face.

How was it possible that she could make her feel so young and so helpless and angry?

A tiny part of her head was pleading at her to calm down and take a deep breath. She quashed it and
burnt the voice to a crisp in her head, she was so angry that the feeling of rage was actually numbing
every part of her thinking process.

She was standing in a replica of her old living room, with her …fucking PERFECT older sister
making her feel like the screw up once again.

All they needed was fucking Big Bob to come in and they could have a tiny reunion.

"Mummy loved you so much-” Olga began.

“Miriam cared more about the bottle and escaping her marriage woes from Big Bob than us, Olga.”
Helga said.

She meant it to hurt.

She didn’t care.

Fuck everything, she wanted to hurt Olga. She wanted to destroy every bit of this monstrous replica
of her childhood nightmare.

She didn’t want to think any more. She wanted to burn everything down to the ground.

Olga was crying now. Of course, she was crying. She was always crying in every situation. Fucking
white women tears, she inwardly sneered.

“How could you say that?” Olga was now raising her voice. “Mommy and daddy worked hard to
put a roof over our heads, and Daddy always provided us with the best-”
“YOU, OL-ga.” Helga growled, enunciating the name exactly like how she did all those years ago. “They provided YOU with the best. They wanted you so you grew up perfectly and wonderful, and safe. I’m the one they didn’t want, so I’m the fuck up-”

“Why do you always make things all about you?” Olga said, looking like a mess, mascara running down her face. “All I wanted was for you to have the house! I wanted you to come home, baby sister! I know things have been tough for you…and I missed you so much-”

The tomfoolery in that statement made her bark out a short, rough laugh.

“Your name should have been Liza. Cause that was just Lies-a Minelli!” Helga shot back. She had no idea where she picked that up from. Probably from Eugene at some point. “You don’t care about me, I don’t know what you want-”

“There were so many things I wanted to tell you, Baby Sister, but you’ve been pushing me away for so long!” Olga cried. “I wanted…I wanted dad to forgive you! I have found it in my heart to forgive you too! Why won’t you accept us helping you?”

There was a silence. Then Helga started laughing.

“You…forgive me?” Helga said, her voice increasing with incredulousness. “You forgive… me?” she said, gesturing at herself at the last word. She shook her head. “You are really something, Olga Pataki.”

She turned to leave, but Olga stopped her, grabbing her hand.

“No!” Olga yelled. “No more you running away from this-”

“Me? You’re the one who’s delusional enough to-”

“We gave you the house because we miss you, Helga!” Olga yelled. “We missed you so much. You live so far away from us, and Daddy and I miss you. Do you think it’s easy for me all these years? I had to go on without a sister! I had no one to be my maid of honour at my wedding, I have no one on my side, I am so…so lonely, Helga!’

She waved a hand towards the room in general. “I built this so I could remember the good times, and it’s just reminds me so much on how much I miss us being us, baby sister. No one understands me, my husband is out all day…my babies…”

At that part, Olga was full-out sobbing. “I don’t know how to relate to my babies. Orlando is taking so much after his daddy, and little Odette is so young…and my baby Ophelia…she’s going down her own path, so far away from me- You have to help me, she’s so much like you, please Helga, please!”

Olga let her hands rise to her blonde hair, running it through her hands. Her mascara was running even harder now.

Helga stared at her. Then she looked away. She sighed.

” Olga…” she said as gently as she could. “We never had the kind of relationship to miss. And I’ll be honest, you fucked up ages ago when I was having the worst day of my life…the worst day of our lives.”

She stopped at that. Then she took a deep breath and soldiered on.
“You were lonely? I had to live with the knowledge that I had no one to rely on. I scrimped on meals to afford textbooks, and I had to photocopy entire textbooks when I couldn’t even get old copies. I had to work three jobs, I scrubbed toilets, I barista-d, I wrote so much, I did so much theatre work, just to make rent.”

Her voice rose as she recounted all the tasks she had to do. She could see Olga trying to interrupt her every few seconds but she steamrolled over her. “If you wanted a family moment to reunite and make peace…you lost your chances ages ago. So did Bob.”

“You wouldn’t talk to us!” Olga cried out. “I tried to reach out, I did I did- but you wouldn’t listen, and you tore us up writing those horrible things about us-”

“Horrible?” Helga laughed. “That is a whole load of bullcrap, Olga. I wrote about my relationship with Miriam, and you came in saying we were disgracing us, and our name-”

“Mommy was never like that with me!” Olga finally snapped. “She was never…she never drank like that when she was with me, she was always there when I needed her,”

Her cheeks were so red. Helga never remembered Olga losing her cool like that before.

"If you thought your life with her was so crappy, have you considered that it was you that made her that way, and made her drink so much?” Olga screamed.

Helga blinked.

Olga gasped, and raised her hands to her mouth, quickly, as though she could shut the door on the words already said.

She looked taken aback, scared and shocked.

Neither of them spoke.

Finally, Helga shook her head. Her eyes had hardened, her jaws clenched to stop herself from crying. Her mouth had twisted itself into a terrible, terrible smile.

” I didn’t- I mean-“ Olga started.

"Olga Pataki.” Helga said. “Didn’t think you had it in you to get angry and spill the T on the truth. “

“Baby sister-”

“Save it, Olga.” Helga laughed, a harsh, ugly sound. She had to. The situation was too hilarious for her. “You were upfront with me. For the first time in years. And you save all the tea and shade just for me.”

She made her way to the door, head held high. “I’m touched, I really am!” She called back, her voice high

She was NOT going to cry in front of her sister. She wasn’t she wasn’t she wasn’t.

She could hear Olga calling after her as she exited the room, walked swiftly down the hallways, and left the mansion.
She didn’t care.
Chapter 32

Marguerite Patricia “Patty” Smith was finishing up with her last trainee of the day when she received the text message.

She took one look at her phone, paused as she read the message, and then continued to finish up with the trainee. When she was done, she waved him off, walked outside the gym to her fave smoothie place to grab a drink, put her headphones on after connecting it to her phone, and made a video call.

The tense, very wide-eyed face of Helga Pataki filled the screen.

“Pataki!” Patty said, taking in her appearance. She looked scared. She hadn’t seen Helga look this panicked since she had called Patty when she had first seen My Gang stocked on the shelves in a bookstore.

“Smith.” Helga replied. That was another indicator that something was terribly terribly wrong. Helga never called Patty by her last name.

Patty took one gulp of her smoothie and swallowed slowly. This looked like this was going to take some time and from past experience, family issues, especially when involving Helga’s, took ages to unravel. “Okay, lay it on me, Helga.” She said, leaning back.

“So yeah.” Helga finished lamely. Through the phone screen, Patty could see that her friend looked exhausted, with dark shadows evident under her eyes. “I walked out there, went to a café, drank ten cups of coffee to sober down-”

“Ten?” Patty asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No one said I was making good life choices today, okay?!” Helga wailed, waving her arms around. It was very Muppet-like in fashion. Patty had to smother a laugh.

“So Olga offered the house to you solely because she wanted you to feel guilty?” Patty said, her tone incredulous. People were so shitty sometimes, and worse if it came from family. Such a gesture perverted by selfish, hateful reason.

“I know! Like what kind of toxic, melodramatic, shitbrain does that?” Helga yelled. “She’s treating me like I’m the black sheep of the family who just needs to settle near the family in order to be like…a good citizen again or something!” She growled deeply. “That…that manipulative bitch!” The last bit was screeched higher than the rest of the sentence, a show of how exasperated she was.

“So how are you feeling after that?” Patty asked. Inwardly she wished she could find Olga Pataki, slap her silly, and then give her a good kick up the backside.

Helga’s shoulders slumped. She looked more subdued now, drained, as she mused over Patty’s question.

“Shaky,” Helga said after a pause. “A little relieved I got what I wanted to say out of the way. Angry that she thinks this is the way to get me back. Tired. Just so fucking tired.” She let her head
fall back so all Patty could see was her chin. “I HATE EVERYTHING!” She yelling, screaming up at the sky. Patty ached to see her look so agonised.

“I’ll be honest, I actually thought you would be angrier about this.” She said slowly. She knew Helga would be emotional after something like that, but Helga was a ranted, and went on for ages. She must have been really hurt.

Helga laughed but it was a rueful one.

“I may have kicked a tree before I left.” She admitted.

Patty paused, before she ventured,” What tree?”

“The one that’s on the property, near the gates,” Helga said. “I was so angry when I stormed off, so I started crying as I did…”

“Oh no-“

“Then I got lost-“

“…What?”

“That motherfucking driveway was long and I accidentally ended up in the hedge maze-“

“….hedge maze?”

“Yeah, I may have destroyed a few hedges cause I got a bit angry, so by the time I finally managed to get out of the maze, I used my last bit of anger to kick a tree over.”

Patty couldn’t help it, she had to laugh.

“Hey hey! I was getting more concerned about not living my life out in the forest of rich people, and people finding my corpse under the elder tree or something.” Helga snapped, but a twitch of a smile was playing on her lips too. Now that Patty thought about it, Helga was looking a little messy and dishelved, and she could definitely see tufts of hair sticking out of her braid. A leaf was on her shoulder, and her jacket was stained with what could only be pollen.

“So…hedge maze eh?” Patty said. “How rich are these bastards?”

Helga rolled her eyes. “Remember that time we watched Bridesmaids and they went to that posh house where they gave puppies out as a gift? Imagine that…but BETTER.” She gestured with her hands, wringing them. “Like …they apparently have a lighthouse and a coffee shop in there.”

Patty opened her mouth, closed it, and finally managed to offer,” These people are waaaaaaay too rich.”

“I FUCKING KNOW RIGHT?!” Helga waved her hands. “Like criminy, they live in Seattle! It’s urban as hell! Where the fuck did they get so much land?”

“That’s … actually a very good question.” Patty admitted. Then, because she knew she had to ask. “What do you think about what Olga said?”
“I don’t know.” Helga sighed. “On the one hand I think she’s full of bull crap, as per fucking usual, and on the other hand I kinda... pity her?” She let out a growl of exasperation. “FAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAK.” She said in a low long whine. “It doesn’t crappity make sense-“

“Okay.” Patty said reassuringly. “We can work on this slowly, okay? Now tell me how you feel, slowly. “

Helga’s face scrunched up, as though she felt displeased and Patty inwardly sighed. The problem with Helga was the fact that the woman tended to rush through her issues using her emotions as a guide but never stopped to properly think through why she was feeling that way. This meant that she lashed out when angry, and then escalated the issue until something really bad happened and she had to atone for it.

She understood that feeling quite a bit: she had done the same when she was growing up. The defensiveness over her looks, her choices, her rep, all while making sure her feelings were protected at all costs meant she was just as stubborn as Helga was.

It was one of the reasons why she and Helga hated each other for quite a while. They were just too similar.

”I just…” Helga said, “Olga sounded miserable. I wouldn’t doubt it if she was being sincere. A small part of me wants to believe her, she sounded so sad. And lonely. And then a larger part of me wants her to suffer, and I’m just so angry at what she said that I don’t care if she’s miserable. And then…”

Helga let herself trail off. Patty, eyebrows raised, prompted her. “And…?”

“I’m angry at myself that I’m still so angry at her and Big Bob.”

Patty was surprised. “Why are you angry at yourself?” She asked. “I heard what happened. In all circumstances, they were shitty, shitty people. You can be angry, it’s fine to be angry-”

”It’s been like….over ten years!” Helga wailed. “I shouldn’t be angry! I’m gonna be 30 this year! People my age are mothers to kids! They forgive and be all benevolent and amazing and graceful and delicate and shit! I should be taking that route right? The path of forgiveness and goodwill?”

”In which universe were you on that path?” Patty asked doubtfully. “You’re Helga Pataki. You’re passionate and angry for all the good reasons. Only you can be ready to forgive and if you don’t want to, you don’t have to.”

Helga sighed. “I hate Olga so much,” she said. “I don’t want to be, and yet I am. She makes me feel so guilty-”

”All the more reason why you shouldn’t forgive her,” Patty said. “Honey, I don’t trust her. She needs work. She needs therapy. She needs-”

”She’s right though!” Helga blurted out. “I’m not the easiest person! I’m hateful, I’m spiteful as fuck, if only I could just compromise! Mom could still be alive, mom could still be here- I drove her to drinking!”

Patty was shocked. “Helga, no!”
“I did this,” she said, looking extremely morose. “It makes sense. Olga was right that they were happy when it was her, mom and dad around.”

“You’re a liar, Pataki.” Patty snapped. “Your mom didn’t turn into an alcoholic overnight. Your mom and dad were having problems for years. I saw her during that Parents Day event, she was barely able to function at the point in time. You wrote a whole book about your mom’s afflictions with alcohol. You know that’s not true. Why are you saying all this now?”

She was nearly losing her patience but she held on to the last shreds of it, knowing that Helga needed to hear this. Gripping the phone, she said slowly, locking eyes with the small camera pinhole. “You’re not making this a pity party, Helga. I know you. You and I are the same. We hate people feeling sorry for us. I get you’re angry, really I do. However, you’re not doing yourself any favours making yourself the reason why everything is shit.”

Helga was silent. Through the tinny screen, Patty wasn’t sure if Helga heard her. Then, Helga sighed, “You’re right, Pattimus Prime.”

Patty unclenched her jaw. She had no idea when and at what point she had started doing it but she was so relieved that Helga had come to her senses that she realised she had tensed up waiting for Helga’s reaction.

“There’s my girl.” Patty said quietly.

”I don’t know what hit me there.”

”You had a moment of self-doubt and fear. Anyone can have that.”

”I thought I was over that stage.”

”Progress isn’t linear, Pataki. You know that.”

”I just thought…” Helga sighed again. “When I was 16 I was so sure that I was going to have everything together by the time I finished college. Then when I started publishing books I thought I would be made, I would be famous. And here I am, 30 this year, and I still get into a tizzy because of something my perfect older sister did.”

Patty leaned back. “Well, we talked about this, remember? We’re millenials. We’re trying to save the world from dying in flames, and then working on making sure the older generation doesn’t screw it up more for us. We’re allowed to get emotional.” A smile curled up on her lips. “Remember Occupy Michigan? We were there.”

Helga burst out laughing. “Oh yeah, I remember. Some guy was terrorizing this girl-”

”I remember, the vegan shithead with the dreadlocks!”

”How did we get him in the end again?”

“We chased him off with a can of spam you were holding!”

”God, I hate spam so much, I was so glad we got rid of it!”

“Yeah, when you threw it against his head!”
They laughed so hard, Patty had to put down the phone so she could collapse herself against the table and laugh. In her ear, the cheap earphones made Helga’s laughter tinny, but it was clear that she was laughing out loud.

Helga’s laughter died down just as Patty managed to get herself in order, and she looked uncertain. “So…what should I do?” she asked.

Patty, wiping the last tear from her eye, smiled softly, “Okay I know you’re gonna yell at me about this…but is there a yoga studio near you?”

“Yoga studi- PATRICIA SMITH I AM NOT GOING TO DO YOGA AT A TIME LIKE THIS!”

“I keep telling you!” Patty protested, laughingly. “Yoga helps with breathing and keeping your core strong and helping you find balance, it’s perfect!”

“Why can’t I do boxing like I usually do?” Helga groaned.

“Did you bring your gloves?” Patty asked, raising an eyebrow.

“….no.”

“Yoga is amazing.” Patty declared. “Eugene and I swear on it. Boxing won’t work in this case, it’s all about forces and you know when you box mad you stay mad for longer. Yoga is perfect. It’s all about finding inner peace, purpose, and keeping you calm.”

“Yoga is stupid, and when I’m trying to keep up with the class instructor in front, I get into a panic about trying to get the right pose, and that tenses me up!” Helga yelled back.

“It won’t be like that!” Patty pleaded. “Trust me, I know this. Terry and I go every week-”

“Ooh, Terry is involved, that explains why you love this, trying to show how easily you can contort your body, huh?”

“OMG shut your face, trash blonde!”

“Isn’t it Valentine’s Day today?” Helga teased. “OMG you’re totally going on a date with Terry later-”

“I hate you so much!” Patty growled.

“I love you more, darling!” Helga cheered. “You’re a saucy minx, teasing Terry like that!”

They finished up the conversation, with Helga grudgingly promising that she would try a few meditation techniques in the park at least, and Patty grudgingly telling her friend that she would tell her all about her date the next day. Helga also promised that she wouldn’t dwell on the Olga thing, and Patty quietly told her to text her if she had any more problems. Helga smiled, the softness of it matching Patty’s, and they disconnected the call.

Patty unhooked an earbud from her ear, the smile now unfurling itself and her eyes lost the glint of humour. She was worried of course. She had faith in her friend to get through this unscathed, but she could still be nervous about Helga. She was all alone in Hillwood at the moment, with no one to help.
Well, she did have Arnold and Gerald, of course. But Patty wasn’t sure if they could be trusted to keep her friend’s confidences.

She dearly hoped they could help a little.

“Gerald, what time is it?” Arnold asked.

He really didn’t have to ask. He had his phone in front of him after all. He clearly knew what time it was.

”Man, you have your phone in front of you!” Gerald said, glibly pointing out the obvious.

“Oh right.” He said, now fiddling with his phone. He hoped his face didn’t show what he was feeling at the moment-

“Dude, why are you plotzing right now?” Gerald asked, concerned and pointing out the really obvious situation.

”I am not- what the hell is plotzing?”

“Well, it means to be frustrated or unhappy with oneself-”

”Where did you hear that from?”

“Sam’s been using it to describe Tim at work,” Gerald said, waving his glass bottle. “They’re both Jewish apparently. It’s a very angry, slow seduction.” He nudged Arnold sitting next to him. “Well, what can you do? Spring is in the air! Like it seems to you.”

Arnold was confused. “What.”

“Well, you’re in love, of course-”

“Not so loud!” Arnold yelped.

“What, you afraid Shereece would blab about it to someone else?” Gerald motioned towards the pretty bartender dressed in a black t-shirt and wore her hair in lavender microbraids gathered and plaited into a larger braid. “Shereece won’t do that. Shereece is lovely! Shereece wouldn’t do that to her loyal customers.”

“Stop flirting with me, Johannson.” Shereece instructed. “I’m in a very loving relationship.”

“Shereece, provider of all that’s good, sweetiepie, honey bun-”

“You’re lucky we only dated once, Gerald.” Sherice laughed. “I’m way too good for you, and you know that.”

“You’re a gem, Sherry. Don’t ever change.” Gerald raised her glass.

“Don’t call me that, Jojo.”

“I won’t call you that if you promise not to do that too.” Gerald countered. Arnold had to laugh.
Gerald, despite being a relatively sweet guy, was a harmless flirt when he had a drink in him. And he never let it go too far with girls too, which was a huge bonus.

"Deal." Shereece nodded with approval. Both Gerald and Arnold raised their glasses to toast her as she left to serve other customers.

"Now that Shereece has invited us into her inner circle of secrecy,” Gerald started. “What are you so annoyed about?”

Arnold sighed. “Well, it’s been like…5 hours and I haven’t heard anything from Helga since school-”

“Yeah, you didn’t tell me what happened after that, anyway., Gerald said, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “So, Ron Weasley got dumped or something?"

“His name isn’t Ron Weasley-”

”Every redhead is automatically a Weasley-”

“His name is Freddie-”

“And you tell me he’s NOT a Weasley?” Gerald said incredulously. “George is now a lonely sad 40-year-old man with NO twin and now that Freddy Weasley-”

“Coogler.”

“-is back in this world, you’re denying his heritage? He might want to be reunited with Ron, Percy, and Ed Sheeran! You know, his family!” Gerald pointed a finger at Arnold. “You are a cruel, cruel man, Professor Shortman.”

”Ten points from Gryffindor, Johansson.” Arnold deadpanned.

“Okay. Seriously though. What happened?”

”Nothing really.” Arnold took another slug of his beer, wincing at how bitter the liquid was. “I asked him what happened, he said his Wasabi Gummy Dealer had gone nuts on him, and he looked so dejected at the idea of no more Wasabi Gummies that I gave him my spare jello cup.” He shook his head. “It seems like there was a misunderstanding, that’s all. “

”Well, did you tell Helga that?” Gerald asked, taking a swig of his beer.

“I left her a few messages.” He admitted. “She hasn’t replied. The last message was me telling her where we would be meeting for drinks. “He looked at his phone. “We were supposed to meet 30 minutes ago, “ he muttered. “I hope everything is okay.”

“Yo, you sad lumps! The party has arrived!”

Both of them turned around to see Helga Pataki striding towards them. Arnold was so relieved to see that she was alive and unhurt that he only barely registered that Helga had changed outfits from what she was wearing this morning. The nice, teacherish outfit was replaced with a soft blue shirt, shorts and leggings. Her hair was a little damp, suggesting she had showered before coming down to meet them. He could catch a whiff of the soap she must have used. It smelt really nice and comforting.

”Helga Pataki, the last member of our single crew!” Gerald cheered.” Shereece, our party is
complete, our warrior is here, please serve us so we can be on our merry way to the Land of Steaks!”

“You’re such a nerd, Johansson!” Shereece yelled.

“ You’re still invited for Saturday’s DnD session!” Gerald yelled back.

“ Is Ophelia okay?” Arnold asked as Helga clambered onto the bar seat.

He saw her tense for a few minutes before she replied. “ Yeah.” Her tone was guarded. “ Yeah it was…it was okay.”

Arnold was a little taken aback by that reaction, so all he could do was reply. “ Oh…oh good.”

They both sat silently. There was a tension in the air that Arnold didn’t know how it happened. Racking his brain for something to say, he thought he would go with something nice and benign.

“ You look nice tonight.” Arnold nodded. “ Did you change your clothes?”

As soon as he said it, Arnold realised that he had said something a little more personal than he wanted, and wanted to smack his head on the wooden bar top. Why why why why why why why was he being so creepy about this?

Luckily Helga had brushed that aside. “ I went for a yoga session.” She said. “ I stopped by the apartment to get some workout stuff and some extra clothes, and took a shower at the gym.”

Arnold, glad to find a more generic topic to talk about, replied, “ Oh, you do yoga?”

She made a face, “ God, no. I hate it.”

Arnold tilted his face in confusion. “ So why do it?”

"Patty suggested it,” Helga said, loosening her shoulders, shaking her head. It made her blonde hair move around a bit and he caught a whiff of the nice shampoo smell.

He had to stop himself from doing something stupid, and luckily Shereece came over to take Helga’s order, giving him some time to compose himself. When Shereece was done, she left. Gerald took the opportunity to excuse himself and that left Helga and Arnold alone at the bar.

Arnold was trying to figure out a nice safe topic to talk about and was about start commenting on how the weather was nice that night when Helga started to speak.

” I met Olga today.” She said.

” Really?” Arnold said, surprised.

“ Yeah.” Helga shifted uneasily in the high chair. “ It’s a long story…”

” I’ve always got time for you, Helga.” He said, reassuringly.

“….so yeah.” Helga, for the second time that day, finished her story.

Gerald and Arnold were gaping. Helga had explained everything about what happened, for what
seemed to be a very long time. At some point, Gerald came back and the explanation had to be restarted, and with extra clarification as Gerald had no idea about the house situation or Helga’s history with her family. They had transitioned from the bar table to the booth where Shereece had served them steaks, fries and beer. Gerald had interrupted a few times to ask questions, while Arnold was mostly quiet, slowly absorbing the story.

Helga had no idea what she was doing or even why she was spilling her entire life story to Gerald and Arnold, especially with this much feeling. Especially to someone like Gerald. While she did like him, she didn’t exactly talk to him like they were close like how she did to Eugene, Patty and Phoebe.

Arnold she could trust, everyone loved Arnold. However, once again she was telling him her life story and her feelings and she was super aware that she was being vulnerable in front of him. She hated that.

Why couldn’t she feel confident and calm and collected in front of him? She felt that she owed that much to him at the very least.

"Mmm, mmm mmmmm! Pataki!" Gerald declared. "Your family is a piece of work!"

"Thank you!" Helga said, throwing her hands outwardly. "It’s nice to find people who understand!"

"Pataki, your family is crappy, and it’s fucking shit what they’re doing to you!", Gerald continued, pointing his knife at her. "I hate that this happened, so you know what? We’re gonna drink more, and I’m buying you drinks for the rest of the night!"

Helga was touched. "Thank you, Gerald." She said. "I mean, it doesn’t solve any of my problems-"

"Fuck your family!" Gerald announced. "You know what? Disown them. You can be my new sister. Timberly is boring, all she does is style hair and her baby is boring. You can be my sister from another mister!"

"I’m white, G." Helga intoned wryly. "I can’t be your sister."

"Hence why I said another mister, sister!" Gerald crowed. "You stay here with my man, I’m buying you all drinks for tonight!"

He got up from the booth and walked towards the bar, where he and Shereece started bantering back and forth.

That left Helga alone with Arnold, who was playing with the fries on his plate. Helga hesitated before she decided to bite the bullet. "You okay, Arnoldo?" she asked gently. "You looked like a bomb dropped on your head."

Arnold was silent, his face unreadable. Then he blinked and Arnold spoke. "You’re very brave, Helga," he said quietly. "I don’t- I can’t-" He stopped short before he tried again. "I mean, you told me what happened before, but I can’t believe Olga would even say that to you."

Helga waved a hand. "Psh, Football-Head, it’s fine. I’m over it." she said airily. In her head, she knew she wasn’t but appearances were everything. She already spilled out a season’s worth of drama on this poor unsuspecting drama-free man, she didn’t want to unload on him even more.
"I mean…" Arnold said slowly. "I can’t believe she would be this selfish."

Helga laughed, ruefully. "Well, that’s Olga F. Pataki for you, she said. "I honestly thought she would change, but well."

She didn’t tell him that she had for one moment in her head, she really wanted a family reunion. She was happy with her life at the moment, but it wouldn’t hurt to at least settle this family situation. Being civil with Olga would have been a step. In most parts, she was civil when she spoke to Olga. Now though, she didn’t think she had that anymore.

She was tired. She was so so tired.

"So what are you going to do next?" Arnold asked. "Does this mean you won’t be able to talk to Ophelia anymore?"

"I…honestly don’t know," she said. "I still want a friendship with her. She’s so much like me, and she’s so cool, and I want to be Obi-Wan to her Anakin. The Dumbledore to her Harry Potter- I want to be that somewhat problematic master to her protege."

She ran a hand through her hair absently. "I don’t think I can do that anymore." she sighed and took a sip of her drink.

In one day she had more or less lost her last remaining link to her sister, a friendship with a girl, and nearly lost the last shreds of her sanity. She was just exhausted. She didn’t even know why she was even in Hillwood now. It didn’t make any sense. She had to call her lawyer soon. It didn’t make sense to keep the house with this happening.

Arnold must have seen the look on her face because he quickly said, “Look, I can’t give you any advice on this-"

Helga was so surprised she nearly spat out her drink. “You? Not have any advice? I’m shocked.” she teased, coughing a little in between that statement. On the plus side, it got rid of that really troubled look on his face. She didn’t like him looking like that.

"I’m not a counsellor, Helga.” He laughed.

"But tell me anyway.” She said. “What should I do?"

"I think it’s too early to talk about this,” Arnold said. “I honestly don’t know what to tell you, and frankly I think that’s not important.”

"Really?” Helga asked. “Then what is?"

"What’s important, “Arnold began, “Is that we enjoy ourselves tonight. And that you take a long good rest. Take the day off tomorrow-”

“But the kids-”

"Can wait.” He finished patiently. “Do whatever you want tomorrow. Sleep in, have a good think. Eat Chinese food. You can figure out what you want to do then."

"But…” Helga said, doubtfully. “I don’t want to take up your time, and I have my answer on the house, I should leave soon-"
"Helga," he said firmly. "Stay with us as long as you want. Figure it out. I know you will be able to do it." He said it with such confidence that Helga was almost convinced too.

She raised her glass in thanks just as Gerald came back, carrying a tray full of drinks and cheerfully announcing his arrival.

She was thankful that at the very least, so far from home and the people she loved she was with people that supported her. She sincerely loved them. And they clearly did too.
When the phone call came in, Helga was jolted out of her daze.

For the past two days, she had been typing furiously on her laptop, furiously trying to get her feelings out on manuscript. She figured that her current emotional landscape was perfect for writing and it beat trying to delve back into the insanity that was the Pataki family mess.

She blinked and remembered that currently, she was on the couch, blankets wrapped around her like a soft burrito to keep warm. Her head felt tight which meant that she probably had to readjust or loosen her topknot because her scalp was protesting. She realised her skin was feeling really grotty, and that she probably had to get up and take a shower soon.

The phone was still ringing.

Rude.

Why on earth did Arnold and Gerald still have a landline in this day and age? She grumbled as she made her way to the phone in the middle of the kitchen. Was it a sense of nostalgia? Was it due to saving phone bill costs? Nobody called on a landline these days unless it was an emergency.

Oh fuck what if it was an emergency?

Her arm shot out to grab the phone in question, and she nearly fumbled while doing so, dropping the receiver. She cursed as she picked it back up and put the phone against her ear.

"Hello," Helga said. She realised with a wince that her voice sounded way too much like a rusty hinge. Damn cold weather.

She cleared her throat. “Hello?” She tried again.

Better, she sounded more like herself.

Helga could make out a deep, hoarse voice that sounded tired and weary. " Is Arnold Shortman around?" The voice said. Whoever they were, they had a pretty decent British accent going on, but they also sounded very very tired.

Helga leaned against the table where the phone was, cradling the phone against her shoulder. " No, he's not in the house at the moment-"

" No! No! No!!!!" Cried the voice on the phone, and it occurred to Helga that she wasn’t equipped to handle crying, especially for a stranger who apparently seemed devastated at the idea of not getting Arnold Shortman. Whoever this person was, they were now sobbing, and in near hysterics.

“...I can take a message…?” Helga said, in what she hoped was a very reassuring tone of voice. How on earth was she supposed to calm someone down when she herself was prone to flights of
emotions? “Or maybe you can call his cell phone if it’s an emergency-“

“I can’t do this!” The voice sobbed. “I’m not even actually looking for him, I’m looking for a friend of his, at least I think it’s a friend of his-“

“I …” Helga scanned her brain for calming down techniques. She had none. “Maybe you can describe that friend?” She asked. Anything to get this guy to calm himself. “Like…hair?”

“Well.” The person on the line sniffled. “She has hair, and two eyes.”

“Okay, fascinating. “Helga drolled. She couldn’t help it. “What else besides vague human characteristics can we work with here?”

The voice was silent, and then they replied. “Right! Oh good god, characteristics! She’s … blue eyed? Let’s just go with that… her name is Helga Pataki, and she’s an author-“

Helga’s brain short-circuited a little and she had to blink. How the hell did this person know about her? That was a silly question, her face had been plastered all over Hillwood months ago, along with her name. But how did he get Arnold’s landline number or knew who she was staying with?

Her guard up, she decided to handle the situation bit by bit. “That’s me,” she said slowly. “What’s up?”

The voice didn’t say anything for a while, and before Helga could ask if the voice was doing okay, they started up again. “Oh thank god! It’s you, it’s really really you! Thank you thank you thank you thank you-“

Confused, Helga was about to say something else when the door to the apartment opened and Gerald and Arnold came in, both holding groceries and chatting about something that Helga honestly wanted to know more than what she was currently handling. Ignoring them, she focused her attention on the sobbing voice on the phone.

“Can… can I help you with something?” she asked hesitantly. In the corner of her eye, she could see Arnold looking at her.

“It’s just, we met the other day, and I really really need to talk to you-“

Warning bells immediately started flashing in Helga’s head. She didn’t meet anyone recently, beyond Olga and Ophelia. Was it TwitDude One or Two? Wait, their accents didn’t sound properly British, this guy sounded like he was born and raised in London or something.

” It’s just, I saw you with your family and I know that you’re the famous author-“

A stalker? Her eyes narrowed. That was not good at all. And this guy knew she had family… has seen her with them. That wasn’t good. She had to warn Ophelia or even Olga.

She must have showed something in her expression because Arnold was now narrowing his eyes and started nudging Gerald, who nearly dropped a bag of chips in the process.

She took a deep breath. She was seriously not in the mood for a guy that was threatening or stalking her and her family.
“Listen, you twatbag, I don’t care who or where you came from, and if you’re a goon sent from my sister, I will tell you I will cream the shit out of you and your pasty ass skeleton will be ground to fucking bread. My best friend is a surgeon who knows her way with a scalpel, and I can now go Sweeney Todd on your ass. I’ve been raised by wolves, fucker, and my other best friend can sic the queer mafia on you while my third best friend will fucking mess you up after I do so with my amazing skills in ninjitsu.”

Dimly she could hear the voice trying to protest but she cut over him. In the background, she could hear Arnold making some sort of strangled noise and Gerald whispering, “Dayummmmmmm.” in a very loud, very obvious voice. She ignored that. She was nearly snarling now.

“And I swear, I have a very specific set of skills which I can use to track you down and hurt you, and if you ever dare call me again on this number, or try to stalk my friends place, I will rip your face in two, show you one half, and make you fucking eat every. Single. Bit-"

“I’m Dean Rex Higgins-Smythe!” the voice finally spoke up, louder than he had before. “We met the other day, when you were picking your niece up? I gave you my namecard! “The sobbing got louder after that. “ I just want to talk to you about business! I’m so sorry I’m just so sorry!”

Oh oh right. Him. That nerdy guy from a few days ago. She had completely forgotten that she had met the dean guy who was bullied like hell by the Twitbros.

Whoops.

She waved a hand at Arnold and Gerald, trying to get them to stand down.

” Oh. Right.” She paused. “I’m sorry about the…bread thing.”

"It doesn’t matter.” The man sighed. “I’ve had worse from parents…”

"So what can I do you for?” she said, now a little more relaxed. Then a thought struck her and she asked hurriedly, “It’s not Ophelia is it? Is she okay? Do you need me to come down and pick her up-"

“ No, no. This has nothing to do with Ms Pataki-Johnson.” Rex Higgins-Smythe sighed. This seemed to be a very common refrain with him. “This actually has to do with the Annual Cheese Festival.”

Now that, she was not expecting. “The what now.” She said flatly.

“ The Annual Cheese Festival!” The man said. “You know, our city is famous for it’s cheese and dairy by-products-”

” Because of our old history of breeding cows or something, yeah.” Helga rolled her eyes. She was aware she was getting kinda rude but sue her, she had just gone through an emotional rollercoaster. “What about it?”

” Ms Pataki, I am a member of the Hillwood Cheese Board,”

Helga started laughing very loudly at that.

” Yes yes, we are very well aware of the jokes. “Mr Rex Higgins-Smythe replied warily. “It just so
happens that one of the judges is dropping out of the festival and we are desperate, I must say
desperate to find someone to replace him. As a famous author, your name would lend our festival a
tremendous presence and would make a great replacement for our missing judge.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Helga said, sincerely. “Why did he drop out?”

“He has to go for surgery and a long vacation to take a long, hard look at himself and his life
choices…”

“What.” Helga’s flat reply, the second of the night, had made a comeback.

“Well, you see Ms Pataki…” Helga could picture the man wringing his hands when he said that, or
fumbling somewhat with his hands, looking aggrieved and panicked. “If I may be personal for a
moment… the judge is me. I need to go.”

This was all getting a little too confusing, so her next reply managed to reflect that well enough.
“What?”

“I can’t do it anymore!” Rex started crying again. “Do you know what it means to be a Higgins-
Smythe, Ms Pataki? It means that you have to do what the family says, uphold the family code, make
sure nothing goes wrong. I’ve been keeping up appearances for so long, going along with their
decisions, their ideas; it’s high time it’s up to me! The kids don’t like me at the school, the nuns detest
having someone like me run the business, the parents make me feel bad to be me, and at home, AT
HOME.”

“Dude, you really need to chill-“

“DUDE!” Rex yelled. “Oh my god, even just saying it once!

“Whuh?”

“The Higgins-Smythes have been in America for FIVE GENERATIONS. FIVE. And yet here we
are, still hanging on to this old British accent as stubbornly as a mule that gets stuck in the fence! I’m
a true blue American, Ms Pataki! And yet I speak with this outrageous British accent! Don’t you find
it weird! Isn’t it revolting? Do you know what I eat everyday for meals?”

Good god ,she really didn’t want to do this conversation anymore. “Erm.” She said intelligently.

“Steak and Kidney pie! “he cried. “Steak Wellington! Toad In The Hole, Bangers and Mash, Fish
and Chips. Pheasant! Caviar! I cannot even look at the blasted things without wanting to vomit!”

Helga, who had nearly starved to death during college because of near poverty and had the recurring
acid reflux to show for it, wanted to know at this point if technology was advanced enough to slap
someone through the phone.

“- Am I a caricature of a British rich man at this point? I am a human being, I have needs, Ms Pataki!
I want to be an American! I want it so much, I WANT IT. I CRAAAAAVE IT. I want to use all the
American words, have an American accent, eat apple pie and and…”

Helga was secretly sure she was the witness to a perv out moment, but didn’t want to say it out loud
due to it possibly becoming real.

“I LUST AFTER A HAMBURGER, MS PATAKI.” Rex was screaming now. “I had to wait until
Grandpapa left before I could get my smuggled buns into the dining room table and put the meat between the buns—"

Now she wanted to slap herself. She thought about it and IT WAS NOW HAPPENING.

“Do you have any idea how much it means to have a true American hamburger and eat it with your hands?” Rex said in a tight whisper, like he was revealing a secret fetish instead of doing what he was actually do, showing that he really was a rich weirdo. “IT IS NOTHING LIKE STEAK ON BREAD. I hate steak so much, it actually cuts into my insides when I eat it. The hamburger meat makes me feel alive…the minced meat, the spices! And you can have variations of it, minced chicken, minced lamb…”

Helga felt like she had to say something at this moment. “Erm, wouldn’t it be better to abstain from red meat altogether if you’re getting this many problems with digestion?” She asked.

Big mistake, she realised 3 seconds later.

“I TRIED, MS PATAKI, OH I’VE TRIED!” Rex wailed. He was on the point of hysteria now. “But apparently the Higgins-Smythes have to keep up appearances! We have to have red meat everyday, otherwise, we won’t be seen as British enough! What I would do to give this life up and be an American! Hamburgers, French fries… where is my Eat Pray Love moment? Oh god, it would be ecstasy just to be able to go VEGAN AND LACTOSE FREE—“

Helga had enough. “Right, fine, that’s it.” She ordered. If she continued this conversation it was obvious she would never get anywhere. “I’ll go and do what…ever it is you want. I’ll be a judge at this stupid Cheese Festival or whatever—"

The squeals and cries of the man nearly deafened her eardrums, but she let it happened. They quickly exchanged text numbers and emails so that she would get all the details, and she hung up the phone.

She turned to the two men, who had been staring at her for the entire phone conversation. Gerald looked like he wanted to sympathise. Arnold had silently passed her a glass of water that she took gratefully.

“Welp.” she said, after a gulp of water. “Seems like I might be going to the Cheese Festival. Do you guys want to come along? If rich people are like him, I don’t think I can deal with anything anymore,”

The pleading didn’t stop for 30 minutes.

Gerald couldn’t help it, he was too busy laughing to notice.

“I’m serious, G!” Arnold was in his room, pacing, as Gerald, sitting up on his bed, was shaking so hard with laughter, his head lying back against the headboard and mouth open. “I need clothing help!”

“I know, man, I know!” Gerald said, wiping tears away from his eyes. ”That’s what’s funny!”

Helga had, after dinner, received a long email with regards to the Cheese Festival judging criteria, and grumbled the whole night about the task she had inadvertently taken on. Apparently, being a
Cheese Judge was not just a, “Go and Eat Cheese” affair. The judges apparently had to look smart and good while doing so.

Helga was now grumbling her way through an online store searching for a decent pair of shoes to match the criteria sent by Rex, while Arnold and Gerald were met with a dilemma.

Well, Arnold, mostly.

Gerald was too busy laughing.

“I TOLD YOU!” He chortled. “I told you that you had to take her to the Cheese Festival! I knew this was going to happen! The universe is telling you something!”

“That… I need to stock up on cheese?” Arnold said, deliberately trying to throw Gerald off.

Nope, that didn’t deter Gerald in the slightest.

“Dude!” the taller man protested, settling down to feel more comfortable on the bed,” That you need to take this as a date opportunity!”

Arnold rolled his eyes. ‘Ger, you saw what happened. She is clearly not in the mood to date…”

“ And you don’t have to!” Gerald said. “However, this would be a good in, dude! It’s perfect! You can spend time with her, eating cheese, drinking wine, walking alongside the hipster barnyards of Paris…”

“Hillwood has become way too gentrified, really.” Arnold grumbled. A thought struck him. “Wait, aren’t you joining us?”

“Well…” Gerald began, as the ding of his phone notified him a message had come through. He took one look at the phone, grinned, and said, “I’m not, apparently. Rhonda really needs me to do something else-”

“Wait what?” Arnold said. “You said you were going to be free this weekend!” His eyes then narrowed, especially as he considered the fact that Gerald looked way too cheerful at a work assignment. “Did you tell Rhonda you wanted to do this job so that you can leave me and Helga alone at the Cheese Festival? He asked resignedly.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.” Gerald replied cheekily. “What boss friend do I have that’s willing to do me a favour cause we have a bet going on about when you two are going on a date? What are you talking about?”

Arnold groaned. Gerald cackled.

“I think it’s a romantic deal!” Gerald finished. “She’s clearly been facing a hell load of bullshit, judging by her sister and her family… why not help her be happy for a bit? Be your sweet, charming self! And honestly, you and her have not been alone in the past few days and she clearly doesn’t see you as date material-“

“Great pep talk, G-man.” Arnold muttered.

“So show her!” Gerald said. “Take her out, show her how you can be, if you and her have a good
date, it’ll open her mind to the possibility of dating you, and if not, then you both would have had a good night anyway eating cheese and being friends. There isn’t anything wrong with that.”

“ I mean…” Arnold sighed. “She probably doesn’t like me…”

“Did she say that?” Gerald demanded.

“No…”

“Then?” Gerald prodded

“She’s bisexual, G.”

“Great explanation, Shortman. I’ll add that in your testimonial of possibly offensive things you would ever say about someone-“

“I mean…” Arnold racked his head, trying to figure out what and how to explain his point. “Do you know how many people are there out there? “

Gerald cocked his head, but gestured for Arnold to continue.

“Dude, she can date anyone! There are tons of people better than I am! Have you seen the people changing the world, just like her? Like those kids for gun reform, Malala, Elon Musk-”

“She is not going to date a teenager, Shortman. Malala is a university kid, and Helga hates Elon Musk. Didn’t you hear her rant about how she detests how he treats the workers in his factories? I think that was during dinner yesterday.” Gerald said lazily. “You’re not even trying, man. You have to go and just give it a try. What could possibly go wrong when the two of you get together?”

A short pause filled the air as the both of them thought about what Gerald said.

“Maybe just…ignore what I said.” Gerald said weakly.

Arnold nodded, silently.

“In any case though.” Gerald said, looking down at his flustered best friend. “We probably need to go shopping.”

“What.” Arnold said flatly. Distantly, it reminded him a lot of the tone Helga took when talking to Rex Higgins-Smythe.

“Dude. You need new clothes!” Gerald said. He got up from the bed, walked over to the wardrobe, opened it up and showed him the contents. “You asked me for clothing help, and I am helping. This is the blandest wardrobe I’ve seen in my life.”

“I have nice outfits!” Arnold protested as he went to defend his shirt choices. “See?” He picked out a shirt. “This is a good shirt!”

“Dude, that is an old shirt.” Gerald rolled his eyes. “You bought that shirt at a HnM 5 years ago. In fact…” he scanned the clothes available. “These are all old shirts! You haven’t bought a decent date outfit since 2015!”

“These are still good!” Arnold said weakly, gripping hard on to the shirt in question. “It’s a great
shirt! You said it brought out my eyes!”

“I did say that, yes.” Gerald conceded. “5 years ago! You are allowed to spoil yourself once in a while!” He searched through the closet, muttering, “No, no, no, no, no.” as he went through the multiple outfits. Finally, he stopped and rolled his eyes. “This is hopeless.” He muttered. “We’re going shopping tomorrow!”

Arnold stared at his friend. “Fuck no.”

“You never want to go shopping with me!” Gerald said. “Come on! We’re best friends! We shop all the time!”

“For groceries.” Arnold said. “I’m not a shopping person, especially for clothes, especially with you. You like all these…options. I like to keep things simple.”

“This from the guy who rocked a skirt in elementary school?” Gerald asked, incredulous.

“I was very short, okay?” Arnold sighed. “So I didn’t tuck in my shirt-“

“And Rhonda thought you were cool enough to rock it.” Gerald countered. “Dude, that’s like an amazing endorsement.”

“What’s wrong with sweaters?” Arnold asked testily. “They keep me warm.”

“Like I said.” Gerald said. “Options. You need a new suit jacket anyway, this is brown!”

“Brown’s a lovely colour!”

“It is, but again. Options.”

Arnold sighed.

“Don’t be that, man.” Gerald said soothingly. “Look, I’ve got a man in TalkBuzz that can hook us up. He’s a great wardrobe person, we’ve hired him from New York…”

Arnold growled, but let Gerald talk him into doing so, letting him make the arrangements to meet up with the guy at Gerald’s workplace after school.

After finally finding the shoes she wanted, Helga had collapsed back on the couch, tired and aggravated.

She had no idea why she even agreed to this Cheese Festival thing. Shouldn’t she be on her way back to Miltown, back with Eugene and calling her lawyer about the house? Why was she still here in Hillwood?

It wasn’t as though she was in pain or something. She said her piece, she got her answer, she had to leave at some point. Why was she still in Hillwood, in an apartment that wasn’t hers, in a place that she had long not considered home?

She missed Eugene. She missed her friends. She even missed Phoebe, though technically distance
wise she was nearer to Phoebe who was in Washington than before in Michigan.

She wished she had someone to talk to face to face instead of through her phone.

Her phone…

She reached out to grab the phone next to her laptop, rolling back to scan through her contacts. She wanted to message Phoebe. Maybe she had an idea on what was good.

Her finger scanned over the O’s, and was about to go to P when she saw the name Ophelia The Great saved in her contacts.

Oh, right. She had forgotten that Ophelia had saved her number in her phone.

Her finger hovered over the screen, unsure of what to do and she honestly didn’t know if what she was going to do made sense.

She took a deep breath, and typed out a small, short message and sent it out, just as the sounds of a door opening and closing premeditated Arnold’s walk into the living room. Seeing Helga, the man smiled and said, “Hey.”

He gestured to the seat next to her and Helga dimly realised that she had inadvertently taken up the whole couch in her stress. She immediately made space for Arnold as the man walked over to sit next to her.

“Hey.” She managed to reply as she scooched over to give Arnold some room.

“I just wanted to see if you were okay.” Arnold explained. The sofa dipped as he sat down, shifting to accommodate his weight. “You’ve had a couple of days-“

“Peachy keen, Arnoldo.” She said wryly. “What else can I be?”

“Well, I don’t know, Helga.” Arnold said slowly. “I honestly don’t know how you’re as strong as you are right now. If it were me…I think I would panic. I admire how you’re being so calm about it.”

She brushed it aside, “I’m not, really. I’m just…shell-shocked. I think.” There was silence. “Eurgh, I hate this.”

Arnold looked confused. “Being shell-shocked?”

“Being this…helpless.” Helga grumbled. “I feel like I’m letting this ride over me. I thought I would be able to control what’s happening, I’m the master of my own destiny. I’m supposed to be Helga Pataki! Shouldn’t I know what to do, be all decisions decisions decisions, do this, do that? “ She leaned back and sighed. “I’m tired man. Also, I’m taking space here, I’m supposed to be back in Michigan-“

“Helga, we’ve talked about this.” Arnold said patiently.

“I know, but-“

“You’re allowed to take your time with things and you shouldn’t feel like you’re disrupting our
routines just cause you have an engagement with us here." he said. "We had an agreement that you can crash here. Gerald and I keep saying that you're welcome here. Why do you not believe us?"

"I'm not sure if you know this, Arnold." Helga commented drily. "But you're known to be a very nice guy."

"Well, you have my promise that I will tell you if something is wrong, okay?" Arnold said, smilingly. "We're friends. You've seen me before my coffee, and used our bathroom. I think we can be close enough."

Helga smiled, but faltered. "I texted her."

"Olga?" Arnold asked.

"No, Phi- Ophelia." She said. "I've got her number because she said she was okay with me prattling on at her, but that was before the -thing. I just texted her just now."

Arnold was silent for awhile, mulling over what Helga said. Then, "Do you think that's a good idea?" he asked.

"Well, no." Helga admitted. "But I want to say that I tried, you know? Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, " Arnold said, nodding, "It does."

They were both quiet for a bit. Helga, trying to lift the tension, decided to nudge Arnold in the arm. "So, Cheese Festival. You and Gerald excited?"

For some reason, Arnold started running his fingers through his hair, as though embarrassed. "Ah, yeah. Well, Gerald erm…can't make it. He's got an…event."

"Huh." Helga said. While she did like Gerald, she couldn't say it was a huge loss to the evening. "That's okay. You're still going though right?"

Arnold nodded.

"Then that's still good." Helga nodded approvingly. "I need an ally, I have absolutely no idea who the local business owners are, and you can help me there, everyone loves you. I can totally make you my shield if I don't want to talk to people."

"I am not going to be your talking shield, Helga." Arnold said, patiently.

"But people talk so much, and you're a lovely man!" Helga said laughingly. "I can use you as a distraction, strong, blonde handsome man like you. I bet the little old ladies love you."

The man looked even more embarrassed. "Yeah erm."

"Then it's settled. "Helga replied, resolute. "You can be my escort and my human shield guy, and we'll have a great time." She beamed. "What could go wrong?" she said.

Arnold was looking at her like he couldn't figure her out. Then he sighed, and said. "Fine." He stood up, grumbling. "So I guess I'll go shopping then."

"Better you than me, Arnoldo!" She yelled back as she followed him to the kitchen. "Can I make you hot cocoa? I so owe you so I'll make you a thank you one-"
Something in his eyes and the small smile that played on his lips, made Helga nearly stumble for a minute, and said, “Only for you, Helga.” He said.

In all honesty, for the rest of the night, Helga had no idea why that look would be the one stuck in her head.

Chapter End Notes

Question: does it make sense to repost this on FF.net? Are you guys happy here? I don't know if I should. Whaddya think?
Of course, Arnold had been to the TalkBuzz building before, as he had visited Gerald at work, collected paychecks from Rhonda, and was invited to a few Christmas parties.

However, walking in today, he felt different, a little scared, worried. This was the first time he had entered the place with a different intent, and where all the attention would be focused on him. And it wasn’t for something important, but rather for something frivolous.

“Clothes ain’t something frivolous, my man!” cajoled Gerald as he strolled in with him. The man had met him in the lobby to escort him upstairs to wardrobe and photo studios. “Clothes make you feel amazing, and give you the confidence to walk tall and proud!”

“G, I am a teacher.” Arnold tried to point out patiently. “The fact that I can handle 4th graders already show that I have confidence-“

“Then explain why you keep telling me you have no chance of dating Helga Pataki?” Gerald demanded as they both walked into a waiting lift. The lift doors closed on them, leaving the two in the lift as it rose up to the fifth floor.

“Because she’s Helga G Pataki.” Arnold sighed. Honestly, he had no idea why he was even repeating this for Gerald, he should have understood the problem by now. “I’m a teacher, she’s born to save the world and fight radicals. I’m plain old boring-“

“Liar,” Gerald said bluntly. “You lead revolutions and change in Hillwood, you giant doofus. You lead by example if not by giant protests and low bangs-“

“Gerald, that’s different though?” Arnold tried to explain. How could he explain that he really didn’t need a lot of help with this? “I just do what I think is right. Helga changes things, she changes laws, people, she makes people feel things-“

Gerald gave him a look which was interpreted very easily as, “Especially for you deep deep south, huh?” Arnold chose to ignore him.

The lift doors opened and Arnold, in a bid to pretend everything was okay, strode forward, not caring where he was walking to.

He stopped, a little confused about where or…what he had stepped into.

The entire sixth floor had been …changed.

Arnold had been to the 6th floor before, the floor which used to house the fashion and beauty department of TalkBuzz. The place used to be the same as any office space, open concept, computers everywhere, gorgeous people who hissed at the sun as held on to their bottles of mineral spring water.

Now though, the entire space had turned into what seemed to be the inside of a spaceship. White, white everywhere, funky animal print wallpaper adorned pillars, and plastic head stumps of knights.
were mounted all over the office in a chic mockery of old hunting trophies of the past. Everything was posh, everything seemed bright, everything was...

“Bougie.” Gerald happily chirped. Arnold hadn’t even heard him come up next to him.

“Uh-?” Arnold said.

Gerald laughed. “Bougie, you know. Expensive, rich looking-“

“I know.”

“Luxurious, decadent-“

“I got it, G.”

“Ostentatious-“

“Really?” Arnold’s eyebrow rose. “You know what ostentatious means?”

Gerald raised his hands in defensiveness, “Hey hey, I learn things. I was talking to someone recently, and she keeps using all these big words, it’s hard to keep up-“

Now it was Arnold’s turn to laugh. “Oh, a girl, huh?” he looked at him intently. “If you keep talking to this girl so much that you’re picking up new words, this must be serious.”

Gerald waved a hand dismissively. “Man, you trippin’ “

“Oh really?” Arnold asked, raising an eyebrow. “You sound scared, G-man. You hidin’ stuff from me, man?”

Before Gerald could answer, a large clothing rack zoomed past them, with a tall blonde screaming, “Make way, make way!” from behind as they whizzed past them.

“Also what happened here?” Arnold asked. “The last time I was here, this place had a nice loft thing going on, like your office floors. Did that woman editor from Ugly Betty come here or something?”

Gerald’s eyebrow rose. “What’s a man like you watching Ugly Betty for?” he asked.

“Class had a project,” Arnold answered, rolling his eyes. “This one kid is obsessed with one of the stars-“

“America Ferrera?” Gerald ventured.

“No, Vanessa Williams,” Arnold replied. “Anyway, that doesn’t answer my question.”

Gerald laughed. “Remember that guy I mentioned?” he asked. “He’s the reason why this department looks like this. We hired him and he’s sorta…changed the entire aesthetic of the place. Rhonda gave him permission because she loves his work, and the fashion beauty department is making the most money all around-“

“Gerald Johannsson, I told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times: if you want to step into this floor, you have to step up your style game!” A short, tan man strolled in all bright eyes, beautiful teeth and dressed casually in a white button-down paired with a shiny, soft looking bomber jacket. He had gone grey early but seemed to have embraced it fully, keeping it an even, luxurious steely
colour all over, and styled to an impressive height. Arnold, who had come in straight from work, felt a little shabby in his plaid shirt, khaki pants and converses. He was also very aware that his hair was longer than usual, and was currently resembling a bush after a day in school.

Gerald merely laughed. “Davie, honey bear-“

“Flattery will never get you anywhere, Johannsson!” the man snapped. Now that Arnold paid more attention to what was happening, he realised the man had a distinct British accent. “All I ask is that you make an effort, once in awhile, dress up in a nice button-down maybe, or a suitable pant leg. Instead, you move away from God’s light by wearing jerseys and basketball shorts every day. “

Arnold winced a little, which Gerald just laughed some more. This was clearly a conversation they have had millions of times. “It’s the office, Davie!” Gerald protested. “I prize comfort over everything else! You know the boys need some air time.”

“The boys?” Arnold asked. Gerald’s wink at that gave him the reply he needed, and the gesture downwards towards the wide leg of the basketball shorts Gerald wore was really unnecessary, but Gerald gave it anyway.

At the comment, the man’s attention snapped towards Arnold instead of Gerald, and Arnold gulped, Davie’s eyes sparkled in an almost predatory manner. “Now what have we here?” the short man asked, walking towards Arnold, and giving him the once over. Despite the fact that the man was clearly one head shorter than him, Arnold couldn’t help but feel small and awkward in comparison to the shorter man’s presence and imperious gaze.

“Davie, that’s my roommate!” Gerald laughed, clapping an arm around Arnold’s shoulders. “This is the guy I was talking about!” Turning to Arnold, he gestured to the shorter man. “Arnold, this is Davinder Kabal, the fashion guy I was talking about!”

The man looked at him with renewed interest, less predatory, more friendly. “Ah, you’re the childhood best friend who needs help wooing a girl!” he laughed. It was a genuine smile, and Arnold couldn’t help but relax a little.

He then realised what Davinder had said, and he baulked. “Wait, I’m just- Wooing?!”

Gerald laughed, and Davinder smirked. “Is he in denial, Gerald?” Davinder asked Gerald.

“Deep in, my man,” Gerald said, mock-sadly. “My baby boy just refuses to acknowledge his feelings! As his mama chicken, I just want to see him take the first steps out of the nest, spread his wings and fly!”

Davinder frowned. “Chickens can’t fly, Gerald.” He said dryly.

A short pause between all three men as they took the time to absorb exactly what Davinder mentioned..

Then Gerald turned to Davinder, pretend-crying into the shorter man’s shoulder. “THERE’S NO HOPE FOR MAI BABY!” He cried. Davinder’s short form nearly buckled under the taller man’s weight. Arnold felt that dying on the spot in embarrassment was perfect for the moment.

“Okay,” Announced Davinder as all three men sat down in his office. “What I want to know are ideas, specs, measurements, style icons- Who do you see yourself as, Arnold?”
With all the attention on him, from Davinder’s genuine interest in him to Gerald’s more amused smirk, Arnold had no idea how to react. He settled for answering the questions. “Erm, I’m more about comfort, I like being warm…”

Davinder nodded as he jotted down notes.

Gerald snorted. “Davie, honey bear, this man’s look is 50’s, lots of plaid and sweaters, boring old shoes. He hasn’t updated his look in years.”

Davinder stopped jotting down notes and looked shocked. “How many years?” he asked.

“3 Years,” Gerald said solemnly.

Davinder gasped. “Why didn’t you tell me this was an EMERGENCY, Johannsson?! He was holding on to his pen so tightly he nearly snapped it in half. “Please… oh god no. There might not be time. Arnold, tell me. What do you see when you think smart dresser?”

Arnold, confused, tried to think back to a few men he knew were constant staples in the smart dresser world. Having “Erm…Dino Spumoni?”

The snap of plastic could be heard as the pen Davinder was grasping broke in two. Gerald’s mouth fell open in utmost glee.

“Wait, wait! I can probably do better!” Arnold said hurriedly. The man’s face looked like Arnold had killed off his favourite llama for a jacket. “Erm, I like erm…Frank Sinatra?”

“Dude, maybe someone from this century,” Gerald said, helpfully.

“Er, Frasier Crane!” Arnold blurted out. “Stan Lee, the guy in the Spiderman films…”

“Peter Parker?” Gerald asked incredulously, his eyes filled with mirth.

“No no, his boss,” Arnold said. “Erm…”

Davinder’s head fell forward in dismay. “So basically, your style icons are old, old men?” he said finally.

Arnold, a little dismayed, nodded.

Davinder sighed. “It’s not a horrible thing, but you’re a 30-year-old man, and sweater vests and Frasier Crane!” He said the last bit with disgust. Arnold winced. The other man’s hand was still clutching the broken remains of his pen and now rested his chin on his hand to mull over his thoughts. He finally stood up, and said. “I refuse to believe that you’re an old man in a sweater vest.

He looked down at Arnold’s converse sneakers and gave an approving nod. “Okay, those shoes give me hope that you have some youth in you, so I think I can do this.” He nodded thoughtfully.

“Youth…if we’re gonna do this, I need more people. “He took his handphone out and opened his message app. “Gerald, if you wanna be forgiven for your atrocious outfits, I think I have a few errands I want you to run. In the meantime, Arnold.” Here he gave him a smile, that unfortunately did not reassure Arnold at all. “I have friends that I think you should meet…”
Arnold had absolutely no idea what had happened in the past half an hour.

Davinder had called up his friends, who had introduced themselves as Vaness Wu and Tyrone Black, and who were now currently chattering in Davinder’s office, which for some reason also housed a giant bathroom, dressing room and wardrobe. Vaness was a tall, baby-faced East Asian Man, who wore a deep black smock and introduced himself as a grooming expert, while Tyrone, a black man who was cleanly shaved all around, introduced himself as a culture expert. Having had no idea why Tyrone was even here, he hid his uneasiness by smiling and shaking both men’s hands.

“Vaness is here cause you need a hair cut,” Davinder said. “A new look equates to a new you, and the drapes have to match the furnishings. And Tyrone is here cause you need more fun in your life, and he can help you go through the basics of how to date someone and not be such a fuddy-duddy.”

Arnold had never been so offended in his whole life. “I am not a fuddy-duddy-” he began, a little mulishly.

“That’s what an old man would say!’ Gerald crowed, and Davinder nodded. It seemed that both of them were currently letting Vaness and Tyrone do their magic and leaning back. At some point, champagne and grapes had been procured, and so the two of them were leaning back and relaxing, snacking on the frozen green grapes.

“I have to ask, Gerald,” Davinder began as they both watched Vaness manhandle Arnold into a chair, all while cackling loudly as the electrice shears began buzzing. “Was Arnold raised by old men?”

Gerald grinned. “Man!” he began. “This guy was raised by his grandparents for ages on end-“

“Wait, you said Shortman before, right?” Davinder said slowly. In the background Vaness’s cackling had turned into howling, hair flying everywhere as he snipped, buzzed and let his scissors fly over Arnold’s blonde hair. “Phillip Shortman raised him?”

“You know that guy?” Gerald asked. “How?”

“My mother’s part of the phone telecommunication in Hillwood, what you call a-“

“Gossip tree?”

“Exactly.” Davinder snapped his fingers at the mention of the correct word. In the background, Tyrone was holding up what seemed to be big, white cue cards with on them, while Arnold, still trapped in the chair, tried not to move as Vaness’ hands flew over his hair. “She tells me everything that happens when I go visit her.”

“The Gossip Tree extends that far and wide, huh?”

“I believe so yes!” Davinder concluded as he popped a frozen grape in his mouth. Gerald took a sip of champagne.

“So, he’s THAT Arnold, huh?” Davinder asked. “Volcano boy, there are stories about him from everyone I know. Even my relatives in Kashmir know about him. “

“Your relatives in Kashmir know him?” Gerald asked.
“The gossip tree extends far and wide, my friend.”

Vaness was now introducing and demonstrating the importance of styling mousse to Arnold. Arnold looked vaguely terrified at the substance, though it could be because Vaness had the look of a man possessed by now. Tyrone was still flashing big cue cards.

“What’s Tyrone doing?” Gerald asked, popping a frozen grape in his mouth.

“Tyrone likes big, significant gestures to get people to change.” Davinder said. “I think he’s more or less printed the best quotes from Rocky 1-4 and used them as a motivational speech thing for Arnold. Oh look, he’s making Arnold repeat the quotes after him.”

He was indeed. Arnold, looking very terrified at the fact that Vaness was moussing his hair and Tyrone was yelling quotes at him, proceeded to do as he was told without moving his head too much.

“I like him.” Davinder said approvingly, “He takes orders very well. But then again, he’s a pretty good kid from the stories I’ve heard. “The man frowned. “Why does he think the girl in question won’t date him?” he asked.

Gerald shrugged, “I don’t know.” He replied, taking a sip of champagne. “Arnold’s a great guy, sweet with the ladies, very nice. This is the first time I’ve seen him this anxious over dating someone. He hasn’t met anyone nice in the past few years.”

Davinder frowned. “A good-looking guy like him?” he asked, incredulous.” How is that possible? Vaness LIVES for guys like him. Oh look, Tyrone is grabbing him off the chair and making him run laps.”

Indeed, Tyrone was doing the exact thing Davinder had described.

“Why?”

“I don’t question Tyrone’s methods, and neither should you.”

A screaming Vaness was running after them both, wielding a tub of styling mousse.

“Maybe we should...go after them?” Gerald asked hesitantly.

Davinder looked unconcerned. “They’ll be fine. Their methods are unorthodox but they get results.”

Now that the first part of the makeover was over, Gerald, Tyrone and Vaness were now sitting back and relaxing while Davinder had whisked Arnold away to the large walk in wardrobe for measurements and to try on some outfits.

“Boo, I swear, I really think those laps you’re doing work so well for Arnold’s thighs!” gushed Vaness, as he leaned back against the soft, luxurious couch.

Tyrone grinned. Gerald had to admit that if he was inclined towards males, he would date Tyrone. The man was charismatic and all charm. Gerald had no idea if he wanted to be him or be with him. “Cardio works for everyone,” he said happily. “Helps people get rid of the bad thoughts. At some point, you start to get into a meditative state.” He offered a bowl of guacamole to Gerald, along with
some tortilla chips.

Gerald, who had absolutely no idea where and when Tyrone procured these two items, was about to ask when two new men appeared out of absolute nowhere.

“How’s the guacamole?” asked a red-headed man who was a green apron, and for some reason, a tight shirt with a giant avocado on it. The tightness of the shirt meant that the man’s muscular frame was shown in all its glory. “ I think the freshness of the avocados helps the creaminess, and I made sure to get just enough lime juice in it-“

“That’s our friend, Emrick.” Tyrone confided to Gerald. “ He works in the food department of TalkBuzz.”

“I’ve been on an avocado fix the last few days!” Emrick happily told Gerald. “ The fruit is amazing, so creamy and juicy and lovely. Not many people know the importance of how to cut and avocado the right way.”

Gerald, who had no idea exactly how to react in this situation, was about to ask if Emrick was doing okay when a cough startled him, and the whole room turned their attention to the last member in the room.

“Avocados.” The tall, brooding man with black hair, kohl-lined eyes and dressed in a pair of coattails. “ Are the beginning of the end of millennials. Along with buying houses in this economic climate. “

Silence.

“Life is futile.” The tall man continued.

“Gerald, this is Ebony Varkness Damien Way,” Tyrone said, smiling gently at Gerald. “ He’s my best friend and he works in the design department of TalkBuzz.”

“I have NO design department anymore!” roared the man, who had been quietly brooding at the corner of Davinder’s office. Now he was stalking around the room, all angry and cat-like. “ The budget has been cut, I cannot work in such circumstances-“

“They only took out 10 dollars, “ Vaness confided. “ They can’t afford the nice kind of cookies, they had to make do with other nicer cookies. Dae-dae is just being dramatic.”

Gerald, who had worked with Vaness many times while the man had happily referred to his hair as she and teared up when a cat fell down by accident on set at one point, decided to believe Vaness fervently when he said Damien was dramatic.

“Why was I even summoned up here?” Ebony Varkness Damien Way spat out. “ I clearly have no purpose here, I used to RUN the design department, build concepts, offer my touch to the world! Now all I can do is rearrange pieces on the mantle, re-order new shelves- “

“Damien, honey, you need to find new inspiration!” Emrick chided. “ It can honestly come from anywhere, and a little set back like this shouldn’t hurt you! Look at me! I used to feel bored cooking things but ever since finding out about avocados, my whole life’s purpose has been renewed!”

Tyrone patted the seat next to him and Damien, who had been brooding, huffed, stalked back to the couch where Tyrone was sitting, and collapsed next to him, resting his head on Tyrone’s shoulder.
while tucking his knees under his chin like a little kid. Tyrone and Vaness cooed over him and started petting him like a cat. Gerald had absolutely no idea what was going on, but it was kinda sweet.

“We’re all very good friends.” Emrick confided in Gerald. “Us and Davinder. We’re all experts in our field, and we were considering maybe filming a show one day, taking it all over the US. Think it’s possible?”

It didn’t seem out of the ordinary for Gerald, but he did have the sneaking suspicion that the concept had already been taken up, and was about to mention it when Davinder walked back into the room.

“Johannson, your friend, while near impossible, is at the very least malleable.” He declared as he sat down on the swivel chair. “I’ve taken some measurements, picked out a whole section that he can go crazy on, and has a decently trim figure that most of the wardrobe can work for him. Also, it helps that his colouring fits most colours and his new haircut makes him look fresh.”

Gerald looked behind and realised Arnold was nowhere behind him. “Where is …”

“I gave him the benefit of the doubt and let him choose his outfits,” Davinder said. Emrick happily offered him a bowl of guacamole and an avocado smoothie, which he took gratefully. Davinder took a sip of the drink and made a pleased smile. “Your experiments are getting better, Emmy”

Emrick waved a hand. “Avocados are my life now.”

Davinder passed the concoction back to Emrick who then passed it to Tyrone. The man wrinkled his nose and nudged the drink to a still sulking Damien.

“No,” Damien said.

“Damien, you are looking paler than usual.” Tyrone cajoled. “Come on, you love sweets.”

“No one understands me and my aesthetic.” Damien declared.

“Dae-dae, come on, I’ll let you redo my office if you take a drink.” Vaness said.

“No. Avocados are the worst.”

Emrick sucked in a huge breath. “Shut your face, you gay whore.”

“Leave me alone, Emrick.” Damien muttered. “Just because we dated at some point-“

“You know what your problem is, Damien?” Emrick said heatedly. “You look at things so darkly, like you’re in a dark room-“

“My whole life is a dark room!”

Tyrone finally shoved the glass at Damien and Damien, huffily, took the drink. He took a sip, paused, then downed the entire drink.

“Awwww, he loves it!” Vaness cooed, and started hugging Damien. Tyrone hugged him on Damien’s other side. Davinder laughed and Emrick lost the huffy look, and went over to join the hug. Gerald did feel a little left out but Tyrone looked over, laughed and said. “Wanna hug Damien? It’s really fun.”
Gerald, a little touched, joined the puppy pile hug.

It really was a fun thing to do.

After Arnold was satisfied with what he had chosen, he walked out of the walk in wardrobe, feeling a little confident.

“So, Davinder, I think—” He stopped short at the six people who were now sitting around the office, happily chatting. “What on earth—” he said, a little taken aback.

Judging by the looks on all six people in the room, they were just as taken aback.

Vaness was the first to speak. “Davinder.” He began. “Why do you have a neon green suit in the wardrobe?”

Davinder, who was a little more in shock, stammered for a few minutes before he replied, “That was for a shoot a few days ago…how on earth.”

Arnold looked down on himself. He was wearing the aforementioned neon green suit, with matching pants and a bright pink shirt. He thought it was a brighter version of the colour schemes he used to work with, so he had no idea what the issue was. “What?” he asked. “It’s really bright and flashy. I think it brings out my eyes.”

Gerald was finally able to make some sort of noise. Bubbles of laughter erupted from him. The rest of the people inside the room were still in shock. Except the man dressed all in black, who was currently hissing and clawing at the air.

Davinder finally stood from his chair and gently led Arnold back to the wardrobe. “Arnold, sweetie. I admire your courage. I don’t admire how you look in that suit. I’m gonna let you go back in to try again, and maybe try to go with something you’re used to. It would help with figuring out your style.”

The redhead from the back yelled, “I agree! Show us your style! I’m Emrick, by the way, and this sulky guy is Damien. You can afford to do better!”

Arnold mulled over it and nodded.

The next outfit Arnold was a little more confident in and as he’d walked out, he thought that maybe he had hit upon a winning combination.

The others, however, thought differently.

“I thought you said I could do things I was familiar with!” cried Arnold as he took in the sight of 6 men looking mildly unsure on what to say.

Davinder was the first to say something. “I think…the plaid might be a bit much.”

“Really?” Arnold asked, turning around in a purple plaid suit jacket, along with a blue plaid shirt, a pair of pink plaid trousers, and ending with a pair of orange plaid shoes. He honestly thought he was on a winning combination here.

“Henny, I think your outfit is like if she was an outfit in Scotland that just came out of the closet, literally and figuratively.” Said Vaness gently. “And she’s not getting along with the Clans cause
she clashes.”

All six men turned to look at Vaness.

“What?” the hair expert asked defensively. “I love the game!”

“Mesh does not work as a nice wooing outfit, Arnold.”

“I love your nipples!” Vaness happily enthused. "But is it just me or is one of them…dented?"

“I saw you eyeing the sweater vests, Arnold! Not right now!”

“Leave the boy alone, Davinder. Maybe he should try a nice bomber jacket?”

“We are all born naked, it doesn’t matter what you wear, cause in the end it’s inevitable that we die naked and ashamed.”

Silence.

“Damien, darling. Have more of the smoothie.”

“Well, I think this will work for everyone.” Davinder sighed.

The others agreed. Gerald whooped. “Arnold, my man, you look straight up baller!”

Arnold had to admit, he agreed. He was wearing plaid, but a subtle blue pattern on his suit jacket, along with a beautiful thin red pinstriped shirt. A matching pair of pants made his legs look long and yet not overstretched, and Damien supplied him with a cane that he had found in the prop department. Vaness had taken some of his freshly cut hair and styled it back, lifting it so the fine gold hair didn’t just flop all over, but added some height and texture.

As he studied himself in the mirror, he realised that for once he looked…taller. Less thin and weedy, and more stronger. But the more he looked, the more he realised that it absolutely did not look anything like how he looked every day. His hair didn’t look like that all the time. He definitely didn’t wear clothes like that all the time.

“This is a mistake.” He muttered.

Gerald looked confused. “In what way?”

Davinder looked concerned. “Are you okay Arnold?” He moved to place one comforting arm to guide the blonde man back on to the couch, with Tyrone, Damien and Vaness scooching over to make room for the tall blonde man.

Having made sure Arnold was sitting firmly on the couch, Davinder asked, gently. “Do you wish to talk about this?”

All the other men were silent, waiting for Arnold to speak up. Damien pushed the rest of his smoothie to Arnold so he could take a sip.

Arnold took the smoothie glass in his hands, feeling the cool surface on his fingertips. The
perspiration of the glass dripped and gathered on his fingertips. It helped him cool down, take the warm feeling away from his head a little, and kept him grounded.

“ I just.” He began. “ It doesn’t feel like me.” He finished lamely. Ah crap, feelings were extremely hard to explain.

“ Well, we can start from there.” Tyrone said. “ Why does it not feel like you?”

Arnold searched for the words to describe what was going on in his brain, as it seemed to be going a mile a minute.

“ It feels like I am lying to her.” He started. Then he shook his head. “ Nah, pretend I didn’t say anything…”

“ No no, please continue,” Tyrone said. He looked at Davinder and the man nodded back.

“ Okay, y’all, let’s go get smoothies and let Emrick show us more of his avocado skills down in the food department!” he announced, standing up in his chair, Emrick was the first to perk out hearing the news, Vaness was very enthused about the idea, and even Damien seemed ready to go. Only Gerald lingered, a little unsure.

“ Dude, man, should I-“

“ G-man, go!” Tyrone said, giving him a reassuring smile. “Let me steal your man for a bit.”

Gerald looked at Arnold, who gave him a reassuring nod, and he left, still looking worried. Arnold sighed as he did so.

“ Man, that’s not what I wanted-“

“ But you did make your friend worry, Arnold, so I want to figure out your situation at the moment,” Tyrone said gently. He edged himself on the other side of the couch, making himself comfortable, and motioned Arnold to do the same.

Arnold, a little grateful, did so, albeit gingerly. “ Won’t Davinder get angry at the suit being crumpled.”

Tyrone snorted, “ Please, that’s what this whole floor does.” He motioned all around the office. “ So tell me what you are feeling. I may be a culture expert here, but I also have a license as a counsellor and a social worker, so I can give advice. I won’t promise I have the solution, but I can work with you on the basics.”

Arnold nodded.

“ So the reason why you’re here is to go on a date with a girl, is that right?” Tyrone asked, gently. “ Be honest, I promise there will never be any judgement with me.”

Arnold smiled wanly. “ Well, yeah… I mean.” He paused. He looked at Tyrone in the eyes. “ Please promise you won’t tell Gerald about this.” He pleaded.

So Arnold did. He described Helga, the passion she had in her voice when she ranted, the sad smiles she had when talking about her family, how down she felt being in Hillwood.

Tyrone nodded, and it was such an encouraging move that he decided to continue.

“All my life people keep coming to me for advice. “ He said. “ And in most cases, it worked out for the best. Now though…” He felt himself stumble a little but he took a deep breath and soldiered on. “I don’t feel like I know everything.”

Tyrone nodded some more.

“It’s like…” he continued. “ I don’t feel confident in what I offer people, and I don’t think I am the right person to help her or make her happy. And I …” he sucked in a breath. “ Love her. I do. But it shouldn’t be me. I can’t help her or be the one for her. She needs someone better than me.”

Tyrone absorbed what Arnold had said, and looked at Arnold with concern. “Arnold, be real with me a minute. Did you ever feel this way with any other people you have dated in your life?”

Arnold thought about it a little. “ I did.” He admitted. “ Pearl- she was one of my exes, she was in love with her own ex, and never got over her death. When I dated her, she was troubled, and when we broke up, I never liked that I was unable to help her with her problems.”

Tyrone nodded, motioning him to go on.

“It made me feel…guilty?” Arnold said, testing the word out like a flavour. Satisfied that it was the right word to use, he nodded. “Yes. Guilty. I felt guilty when I was unable to help her.”

“Did you feel this way with anyone else in your life?” Tyrone asked.

Now that he thought back to it, there were indeed a few people he felt unable to help and as a result felt absolutely horrible and bad. The relationships he had with those people after realising it soon deteriorated as well. “Yes.” He said. “I did. It’s possible.” And here he said it slowly. “It’s possible that I went into psychology to help people because I thought I could help them, and when it feels like I can’t help them, I don’t feel worthy of them, or of their friendships. And I feel like I’ve failed.”

Tyrone nodded understandably. “From what Gerald tells me, he says you’ve always been the one who had all the advice since you were a kid.”

“I did.” Arnold said. “At least, I thought I did. I knew what to say in most cases. It’s just…” Arnold paused. “When you’re an adult.” He said slowly. “The storyline is that you’re meant to get stronger and smarter, wiser as you get older, and you could help people all the time.”

He wrung his hands a little. “I’m gonna be thirty soon,” he said. “I still help people, I still give advice, but then the advice doesn’t work sometimes. With her I want to be cautious. When I give her advice, and then when it hurts her, I end up feeling even more guilty, like it’s my fault she’s like that. “He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t feel I’m the one for her,” he said. “I feel like I do good to get praise. I don’t feel like I’m a good person because it feels like I’m pretending. And she doesn’t deserve a fake person. She deserves someone…truthful. Honest.”

Tyrone nodded, deep in thought. Then he scooched closer to Arnold, making sure Arnold saw what he was doing.

“Arnold, can I be honest?” he said. Arnold nodded. Tyrone swallowed a deep breath and said. “I
feel that way all the time.”

Arnold released a little sigh that he didn’t know he was keeping. “Really?” He asked. “I’m not… I’m not alone in this?”

“No way,” Tyrone said, laughing ruefully. “Definitely not alone. And you should note though: people don’t actually go through life striving to be perfect to fall in love.” He paused and wrinkled his nose. “Well, that’s a lie. People think that perfection is important in a relationship. It isn’t.”

Arnold sighed. “I thought about that, honestly. It’s just, I keep hearing stories about how great my grandparents had it, or the romance my parents had. It sounds perfect and I think I want that for myself. I want to be there for Helga, I want to be the person who helps her through the bad times.”

“Arnold, I gotta ask.” Tyrone asked. “Do you love Helga, or do you want to help her?”

“Of course I love her.” Arnold said. That was never the question, he knew that he was in love with her.

“Then all of what you’re thinking of in your head?” Tyrone tapped his head to emphasize his point. “It doesn’t matter. The good thing is that you are honest about what you are feeling, and imposter syndrome is a real thing, let me tell you. However, I think what you’re unsure about is the confidence in your own decisions or the fact that you’re not willing to go for this relationship solely because you are overly afraid of it not being perfect or not being the perfect person for her. There are no perfect people for anyone. There is no such thing as, ‘The One’. You fall in love with people, and you should always go for it, to admit that what you are is someone in love. Then what happens later is the work. You cannot let something like your shortcomings be the reason for you letting something go. You have to use it as an opportunity to figure out if you are willing to go through with it. It’s not just about one single feeling. It’s about that one feeling, time and continuous work to choose each other.”

Arnold sucked in a breath he didn’t know he needed. “It’s not wrong? To feel inadequate?” he asked.

“I would say it’s not wrong to be inadequate, but it’s wrong to let it stop you from doing anything,” Tyrone said gently. “I think what you need is a plan to keep yourself motivated. And you need time to boost your confidence and know that it’s fine to do things you want to do. It’s fair for you to go after things you want and it’s definitely not selfish to choose to love someone despite your shortcomings.”

The two men sat there for awhile, letting the words sink in. Then Arnold spoke up. “Thank you.” He said. “I can see why you have a license to counsel. Though maybe you should have done it before making me run laps around the sixth floor next time?”

Tyrone burst out laughing.

Chapter End Notes

*fans self*

Why yes I am a fan of Queer Eye.
What's your point?
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

It's been...a tough month and a bit.

What with the job hunting, my uncle passing away, the family draining my head and energy, me having a few mini-breakdowns, it took a while and a half to get this out.

I left the HA fanpage for a bit because I disagreed with a few stances. I needed to reconfigure, reconnect, recircuit my head.

I want to thank you all who are still here, still willing, and still okay with listening to what I have to say.

The fact of the matter is, all authors are voices seeking for respite in the world, and anytime you read and review and even maybe think of any story, you are in essence helping the author. My heart is a little more grateful that you all are here to listen tp this story, and I won't give up in trying to finish this.

Please do give me any spoons you can offer and I will do the same.

We're all in need of people, in the end, to listen to our hearts.

To be fair, Helga been so rattled by the events of the last few days that she missed out on a few things.

She had been picking out clothes to wear to the Cheese Festival. Rex had recommended she wear something befitting her role as an author. Her suggestion of sweatpants, slippers, and a ratty tank top (which was what she regularly wore to write/lounge around) had been denied.

“Writers have to be comfortable to work!” she had yelled at the phone the day before, during a rather frustrated dinner telephone call.

Rex then started crying.

She knew she had lost the battle there.

So, grumbling, she took her nice black turtleneck, a pleated skirt she had never seen before worn with a pair of the nice black stockings to keep out the cold, and went to the bathroom to change. She kept her doc martens on though, it was her sturdiest pair of black shoes and it could pass as formal enough when worn with the other clothes. She figured she looked respectable and left the bathroom with the knowledge that nothing was going to knock her off her feet-

That was before she ran right into a solid warm wall right in the hallway. She flailed backwards. She kept forgetting she was in a house with two other people.

“Criminy fuckwits!” Helga growled, quickly reaching a hand up to touch her throbbing nose. She had always been self-conscious of her nose, fleshier at the tip, so much like her father’s and nothing
like Olga and Miriam’s. She was not going to be happy if she broke it and bent it all out of shape.

She was also pretty well aware she was probably making a huge deal out of the collision but meh. Her nose, her concerns.

She was aware of a male voice yelling apologies. Sounded like Arnold, that asshole. “What the h-“ she began before her voice died in her throat.

Because shit, if she ever thought Arnold Shortman was a good-looking man before, she clearly wasn’t paying that much attention cause goddamn goddamn goddamn goddamn.

It was probably the new haircut that pulled it all together. She knew he had a haircut the day before, but she was too busy on her phone placating a crying Rex that she really didn’t pay much attention. Whoever was teaching him how to work his hair now was a fucking genius, it was slicked back but it had body and an actual style. He actually looked like he was living in the 21st century.

Or it was possible the suit jacket he was wearing that did the trick. Blue really did bring out his skin tone, and it was even in plaid, albeit in smaller, subtler detail. It was casual enough that he had pulled back the sleeves, revealing his forearms and a lovely, vintage looking wristwatch on his left wrist.

She never realised he had forearms that nice. Were forearms totally a thing? She’d have to ask Phoebe. Or Eugene. Or even Patty, she trained guys, right? She was positively aware she was staring now.

“Helga?” Arnold was saying, waving a hand over her face. He sounded concerned. “You okay?”

Oh right, she had to actually say something back. That’s how conversations worked. Cause talking to people was a thing.

“Goddamn, Shortman,” she marvelled, nodding approvingly. Give credit where credit was due right? “Like the new look! Makes you look snazzy.” She had to look up to meet his eyes with hers when she said that but lingered a little longer than what was absolutely polite on his shoulders, cause, damn. Great shoulders.

It should have been a crime to make a 30-year-old man blush but fuck, Arnold was gorgeous when a small dash of pink bloomed over his cheeks. “Erm, yeah. Thanks.” He ducked his head quickly after that, not meeting her gaze.

The awkward pause after that was so thick Helga was pretty sure she could use it to build a condominium, so she decided to break it by asking, “So…you looking good for your court date huh?”

The joke, if that could be considered a joke, didn’t seem to work. If anything, Arnold seemed to get even more flustered. “A date? What date? I don’t know if it’s a date-“

“Holy fuck, chill,” Helga said laughingly, though now she was getting a little concerned. “Court date. You look like you’re off to court.”

Arnold looked a little confused.

“Cause…you know. You look nice?”
Still silence, though Helga could see he was looking even more flushed than usual.

“And…people tend to dress up to look nice for their day in court?” Helga tried again.

Nothing. Helga frowned. “You okay?” she asked. It was still winter and flu season, though she had never seen Arnold sick before. He was able to run around in his sweater and jeans with no repercussions for near all seasons back in the day. However, considering the fact that he was looking sick a few days ago, it didn’t seem out of place. “You should get more water in you, cause if you get sick while going out for the Cheese Festival –"

“I’m good!” the man blurted out. “I’m just- This is- I’m wearing this, for the Cheese Festival. “

Now THAT was a surprise. “Really?” Helga said. “I think you look amazing.” She gestured to her own ensemble. “You’re making me look bad here, Shortman.” She teased. “I can’t be seen looking this trashy while you’re wearing that suit over. People would think you were the distinguished guest instead of me.” She laughed, a little uneasily.

“I think you look perfectly fine, Helga.” Said Arnold with such an earnest look she honestly didn’t know how to react to.

She still didn’t know how to react later in the car ride on the way to the Cheese Festival, so she resorted to texting Phoebe.

Pheebs, you have to help me.

Phoebe had replied that text with a simple ?

Arnoldo is being weird and twitchy. I think he’s ill.

“You excited to go to see the Cheese Festival again?” Arnold asked from the driver’s side. “The last time you’ve been to one of this, you were like…10?”

Helga, who was unsure on what to do, decided to keep calm and react to the situation the way anyone would: with civility. “Yeah, 10.” She decided to add to that with a smirk. “Do they still have those fried cheese bars? I could do with something hot, this chill is getting to me- “

“Oh sorry, did you want the heater on?” Arnold asked, looking flustered.

“ No, don’t-"

She was ignored and the car started radiating heat, making the ride bearable but certainly not less tense. She rolled her eyes, but decided that if he was truly falling sick, the car being warmer would certainly not be a deterrent in helping him get better if he was sick.

Her phone vibrated and Helga quickly opened her notifications to read what Phoebe had to say.

People are allowed to be weird and twitchy without being ill you know, Helga. Said the message. She must have caught Phoebe in a prickly mood. However, I will acquiesce to help. Symptoms?

Helga quickly typed all the ones she knew, namely the red flush, the stomach-ache awhile back, the
aversion to touch and the fact that he kept saying nice things about her.

*The last one... isn’t a medical condition of any kind, Helga.*

Also, he seems to have gotten a haircut and new clothes so he looks really decent looking!

*.... also, not a medical condition of any kind.*

He’s acting suspicious and the fool, Phoebe! She texted back furiously. *I swear by Betsy Ross and the heroes of the Marvel Franchise that something’s the matter with this idiot child man!*

*Helga, I would suggest it might be best to give me more information.* The reply came back. *Can you send me a log of any strange symptoms for this evening? It might be good for a study.*

Phoebe Heyerdahl, actual scientist, in love with observational studies. If she weren’t such a talented neurosurgeon, she would have been a terror in academia. *I’ll keep you posted, my funny nerd Friend.* She typed back.

*You better,* Phoebe had sent. *I like doing profiles on friends. I like the analysis.*

*You little possible serial killer, you.* Helga typed back, fondly chuckling.

“Good text?” Arnold said from the driver’s side.

“Phoebe is my bestest Friend for a damn good reason.” She said with a relish.

“I can agree to that.” Said Arnold amicably. “Phoebe is honestly the nicest person I know.”

“Got that right, loser.” She snorted. “Phoebe is the best person I know, and every day I aspire to be the queen she really is. She’s beautiful, skilled, knows 10 different ways to skin a man—“

“Wait really?” Arnold asked, laughing a little, but looking unnerved.

“She’s a devil with a scalpel, and she can do things with a bone saw that nobody else can, Football Head,” Helga said lazily. “I used to joke that she should consider taking out any assholes I dated, and she actually taught me some tricks with a penknife.” She waggled her fingers and cackled, “I can shank you if you displease me, and my tiny, adorable best friend has taught me everything on the subject.”

Arnold laughed again, this time a little more uneasily. “I guess she really loves you a lot.”

“Well, I hope so, because I love her too,” Helga said, the words coming out quickly. “She’s my absolutest best friend and I worry I take her for granted.”

“I’m sure she knows that too,” Arnold said gently.

The both of them chatted a bit and Helga relaxed, the tension from earlier slowly dissipating. The earlier weirdness was just a one-off, nothing more.
“So, what actually happens in a Cheese Festival nowadays, Shortman?” Helga asked as they closed the doors of the car and made their way out of the car lot.

“Well, I’ll be honest,” Arnold said laughingly as he stopped by a parking meter. He took a few coins and slotted them into the machine, hearing it whirr a little. “I haven’t been to the Cheese Festival for ages.”

To say Helga was surprised was an understatement. “Really?” she said, raising an eyebrow. “I honestly thought you brought all your dates to this thing. This thing is some sort of romantic milestone round these parts.”

Arnold was flushing again, though now Helga had decided to hold her tongue and not mention it. “I don’t think it’s that romantic a festival-“

Helga scoffed. “Liar. All the kids wanted to bring their crushes and go on the Tunnel of Cheesy Love.”

“You’re not wrong,” Arnold admitted. “It’s apparently a hipster thing now-“

“Say no more,” Helga said, rolling her eyes.

Arnold tilted his head. “What, you don’t think hipsters like cheese?”

“Hipsters are so pretentious with their cheese.” Helga groaned. “The Michigan hipsters are super super super into the vegan cheese movement, and something about how they’re planning to start a restaurant serving deconstructed cheese sandwiches, which you know is basically a bowl of mould, a dish of milk and yeast. YEAST.”

“I don’t believe you,” Arnold said drolly, as they walked right up to the security booth.

“You have to, Football Head!” Helga said, waving her hands about. “Eugene and I were dragged to one once-“

They were stopped by a big burly bodyguard who gruffly asked them for their IDs, until Helga looked at him and went, “Hey, you’re that bodyguard from the bar!”

“Aw, heck!” muttered the man, whose high Kiwi accent revealed him as the bodyguard Helga accidentally stepped on the last time she was at The Slash Shipyards. He let them in almost immediately.

Helga looked at Arnold with a mixture of pity and guilt. “Okay, I really should apologize to that guy.”

“Is it bad that I don’t know what you did?” Arnold asked.

“Nope, just keep rolling with it,” she said as they stepped into the Cheese Festival. Helga had to bite back a gasp. It looked…absolutely nothing like the Cheese Festival of yesteryear.

It looked way too grand, for one thing. Gone were the carnival aspects of the place, and there were definitely no signs of the cheesy Americana (pun totally intended, thought Helga ruefully) that defined the Cheese Festival of yesteryear. Instead, there were stalls upon stalls of cheese manned by
men in chef outfits, diligently slicing cheese in different shapes while the customers lining up oohed and ahhed. There was definitely no carnival music, no artificial whirlwind of sounds from winning at games. Instead, the air pierced with the music of Vivaldi and quiet murmurs as people sipped their wine and daintily ate slices of cheese.

Judging by Arnold’s look, he too was surprised.

“What the hell happened?” Helga blurted out in surprise.

“Gerald mentioned they became a little hipster.” Arnold murmured. “I wasn’t expecting…this.” He said the last bit emphasized by his eyes locking on to a corgi carved out of a wheel of cheddar on display across the area.

“Maybe communism is in, and capitalism is out, which makes it in again?” Helga whispered.

“I honestly have no idea any- “

“Helga Pataki!” A booming voice was heard and both Helga and Arnold whipped their heads to see an old wizened man striding towards them. He had broken off from the group he was talking to and Helga could see that the group was staring at their direction. Despite the fact that the years had clearly aged him, Helga could vaguely recognise the man, and the British accented hinted towards his identity pretty quickly.

“Mr Rex Higgins Smythe the First, I presume?” Helga said, the last bit in a pained gasp as the man grasped her hand very firmly and pumped it up and down in a forth right manner. The man was clearly ancient and yet so very spry. Her hand was beginning to hurt.

“ In the flesh!” the man bellowed. “Junior Junior told me to expect your appearance, but I was not expecting you to grow up to be a fine young lady! And this escort of yours-” He roved his eyes up and down Arnold’s form. “Seems familiar!” he concluded brashly.


“Ah yes! The Shortman boy!” The old man interrupted brusquely. “Yes, you’re related to that Phillip Shortman, the scourge of the Earth! The Tainted Folly of the Saints! The Schill of the Communists! The-“

“ Yes, yes I am all of those things and more.” Arnold finished hastily. “I’m just here for moral support, I really have no horse in this-“

“ A HORSE YOU SAY!” bellowed the man. “Seems like you need more education that expected. Well, it’s to be expected, you’re one of those Communist millennials people keep talking about!”

He grabbed Arnold by the jacket sleeve and dragged him off, yelling back, “Ms Pataki, you will get your suitor back as soon as possible after I show him the ropes!” Helga tried to protest, and Arnold looked like he wanted to yell something but whatever it was seemed garbled and grew softer as he dragged him off.

Feeling decidedly out of place, she looked around and realized that the group in question was still staring at her. Now extremely self-conscious, she decided to be professional and went over to introduce herself.

“I’m sorry about that.” She said, hoping her face did look suitably contrite.
“Oh, don’t be!” said the man closest to the edge of the group. He had red hair, freckles and was rather handsome. “That guy’s a bit off his rocker, but he does help organize the festival and is a major shareholder in businesses in Hillwood so we all play nice with him. I’m Emrick, I run the Food Department in Talk buzz.”

The other two people volunteered their names, and Helga could see that both of them were variations of the hipster business owners that could be seen all around Hillwood. One was even wearing what seemed to be rainbow suspenders, a multi-coloured shirt and a dark blue puffy vest with orange and yellow stripes.

Smilingly, Emrick turned back to Helga and went, “We’re all invited guests and judges of the Cheese Festival, and there’s supposed to be one more besides you.” He turned around and he smiled, along with his eyes, “In fact, he’s on his way here right now!”

Helga could see a big man walking over, wearing a suit that fit his big burly frame. The way he held his arms seemed familiar. Then she balked when he got closer and his features were more prominent.

She hadn’t seen him in the flesh for ages but she had seen him in pictures on the wall in Mr Simmons’ office. Harold Bergman had no changed one iota. Except that he was scowling at Helga, which was something she wasn’t wholly expecting.

“Ha- Harold!” she squeaked, uncharacteristically. She recovered quickly, and gave a shaky smile, extending her hand out in a handshake. “Long time no see.”

Harold grunted and extended his own, but it was reluctant.

It was easy to explain the subtle animosity Harold had towards Helga, and Helga didn’t blame him. She had yelled at him when he came to visit her on her last day in Hillwood. The Bergmans had been huge customers at Big Bob’s Beepers, after all, and went to be polite, dragging Harold along to say goodbye to his classmate. Helga had called him a moon-eyed goon. Harold’s bluster led him to call her the b-word, she then called him a fat loon who would never amount to anything, and at least she was on her way to bigger brighter things. They had never spoken to each other since.

Didn’t Phoebe once say that anyone who kept a grudge for 10 or more years was a petty fuck or something?

It seemed to apply to Harold at the very least.

“Oh, you two know each other?” Emrick said, his cheerful manner clearly indicating he missed the memo. “That’s great! Harold’s the head of the Small Businesses Association in Hillwood, a great contributor to Hillwood’s food and drinks tourism, and he’s been with us for 6 years already!”

Helga smiled at Harold, legitimately happy for the man in question, but he gave a small snort and then turned away to look somewhere else.

“In any case, we’ll just have to spend an hour of so trying out all the cheese and then we can go on to the fashion show - “Emrick continued.

“The fashion show?” Helga asked, confused.

“Oh, you’re in for a treat!” He said chirpily. “They make outfits out of cheese –“
Helga reminded herself that hipsters were truly unique in the world of Hillwood. She turned to look at Harold, who was making a big show out of pretending not to notice her, and she felt a little dismayed and disgruntled.

*You knew this was going to happen at some point, Pataki!* She inwardly growled. *You were lucky the first few times but it’s time you faced your fears, not many people are like Arnold and Gerald!* Now *fuck this bullshit and get your act together, you need to be professional and act like the bigger person here!*

She stopped her thoughts from drifting just as Emrick, who was still happily talking away, started on the last bit of the itinerary.

“– And so afterwards we’ll be inviting our biggest guest of honour to receive a prize as a token of all the work she’s done in the community.–”

“*You can contribute to the cheese community?*” Helga couldn’t help but ask.

“Oh, you’ll be surprised!” Emrick happily said, then he clapped his hands, “Alright, folks! Our judging panel is complete! So, what we need to do is get briefed, and we’ll be off to the first event!”

Helga, who obviously did not hear a single bit of whatever Emrick was talking about, decided to just go along with the situation. However, she did have one question. “*My companion, my friend–*”

“Oh, he’ll be fine!” Emrick said, waving his hand. “The old man is crazy but he’s got his wits on, and he knows where we’re going. He’ll take your friend with us, and if you’re worried about us getting along, no worries! I feel like we’re going to be great friends.” He made a hand gesture to show her where to go and Helga, resigned, decided to go along with them.

She hoped Arnold would be back soon, she could really use a friend. The one other person she knew in this group didn’t even want to talk to her and like it or not she was feeling very very alone.

Arnold was feeling very very alone in this situation, and he really could use a friend.

The man had been ranting at him about the wonders of capitalism and how Phillip Shortman was a coward for not even showing up for the last few Pig Wars, which really wasn’t a conversation he could deal with.

So, when someone somehow managed to distract Rex Higgins-Smythe the First from his rants, Arnold saw his chance. He managed a furtive, “Yeah I gotta go thanx bai” before he rushed off back to the direction that he was at before Helga and he were separated.

She wasn’t there. Neither were the group of people he last saw her with.

He was about to take out his phone to text her when suddenly he heard someone calling his name. He turned around, cause something about the voice was familiar, and when he finally located the source, he was so surprised that his eyes widened. He couldn’t help but smile.

“Hey!” he said, opening his arms in a welcoming gesture. “What are you doing here?”
“…Now let me tell you why the great leader is right through the art of Cheese Sculpting!” said a weedy young man, who was currently wielding a very sharp and dangerous-looking cheese knife.

Helga inwardly groaned. She could see some of the other judges cringing, but the man with dark shadows under his eyes just grinned and proceeded to shape the cheese wheel.

It had been…15 minutes? 30 minutes? An hour? All in all, she was bored.

Cheese sculpting for some reason was way more boring than what she expecting.

Also, it did not help that she was currently sans Arnold.

Where the hell was he? Did that posh old guy kill him off?

She hoped not, she really did like his company. Arnold was, in comparison to other cis-males of the same age, very sweet and very considerate in the sincerest of ways, she was looking forward to actually spending some nice time with him outside of the school and the apartment.

In a way, 9-year-old Helga would have been beside herself, she thought wryly. Here at the Cheese Festival with Arnold, the love and joy of her youthful, innocent years! The years she would follow him and whatever girl he was taking at the time, seething inwardly at the injustice of not recognizing the goddess she thought she was, but then balking if he even paid any attention to her, even in the little interactions. Dating someone was so overrated sometimes, but it was one of the things you clung on to when you were a lonely girl and oversimplified the idea of relationships.

But then again, people grew up. And after a slew of dating experiences, a small festival with a bunch of friends was way better than any first date that promised sex at the end of the day.

It helped that Arnold was one of the best guy friends. She probably would never be as comfortable with him as she was with Eugene (They even farted and pooped in front of each other, it was safe to say that they were family now), but he was close to getting there. In another life maybe they could have gotten together, but what they had now? That was a pretty close friendship.

What he was not close to doing was finding her.

She was about to start calling him when she heard his voice, in the distance. She looked up to see if it was actually him and as she saw his tousled blonde hair, she smiled in relief and waved him over…

Only to falter when she realised that he was not alone.

Not only that but he was in the company of one of the people she honestly didn’t think she was ever going to see again.

Her red hair was still as vibrant and shiny as it had been 21 years ago, still in braids but now piled around her head and pinned and teased so the braids looked glossy, huge and loose. She didn’t have a gingham dress on anymore and her old Anne of Green Gables demeanour had matured into an elegant yet comfortable aura of bliss and contentment. Her purple fuzzy sweater and green ankle length skirt should have looked absolutely ridiculous but she pulled it off, looking as ethereal and gorgeous even as she did back then.

Lila fucking Sawyer was here.
Lila fucking Sawyer was here and next to Arnold.

Arnold had been acting weird the past few days and now that she saw Lila she put two and two together.

The stomach-ache, being distracted, the haircut, the new clothes, him flushing when she mentioned the word, “date”, him doing it again when she mentioned how the Cheese Festival was the place for romancing potential love interests- It made sense now!

Arnold Shortman must have meant to meet Lila here and replicate a Cheese Festival date that they had back then.

As the both of them walked over, she saw Lila lean towards Arnold and whisper something quickly, making Arnold flush and wave her off, while she giggled as she turned back to look at Helga.

Helga, with a mixture of resignation and a small amount of envy, came to a realization about something she really didn’t think she had an issue about, but she did.

Lila Sawyer was still gorgeous and put together.

And Arnold had a thing for her, judging by the blush.

They really looked great together. Him tall and handsome, she petite, slender and put together. They would make a cute couple.

In all honesty, if this were a fanfic, she would ship them.

Why was that making her feel so uncomfortable and uncertain?
Tempered by the passing years and nostalgia over her childhood, as well as therapy, talking it out with Eugene and Phoebe, and reflection, Helga had come to a few conclusions about Lila Sawyer.

1) She was jealous and disproportionately angry at Lila for being Arnold’s crush, and it was no fault of the girl at all.

2) She was also unsettled by the fact that Lila was a petite, genteel, beautifully put together girl who spoke eloquently, was well-loved by the mass public, and basically popular. Everything that Helga was not.

3) Lila reminded her way too much of Olga. (Actually, that was linked to the second point.)

4) She had accidentally bought into the idea that women had to compete and hate each other. It was absolutely silly. (That, she blamed her dad.)

5) In essence, Lila Sawyer had always treated her with kindness, and never said an unkind word to her.

Realising that a lot of her hatred of the girl stemmed from insecurities and fear, Helga had always regretted treating Lila Sawyer that badly, and relaxed her hypothetical stance towards her throughout the years. She honestly did wish the best for her and until right now, she had.

At the moment, however, traces of her old, insecure and angsty personality came back. She managed to keep some of her irritability down, but damn, the insecurity part was harder to manage.

She looks amazing. She thought wistfully, as she gazed at Arnold and Lila chatting and laughing away. I couldn’t wear that hair if I tried. Braids like that made her look a hell lot like a milkmaid and after Inge had dressed her up like a European mascot on the hot cocoa can, she abstained from wearing any type of hairstyle that deviated from her ponytail. Eugene and Phoebe had, in later years, showed her how to wear her hair in simple hairstyles, like French and fishtail braids, but without their help, she could never manage to make them work well.

Lila though. Lila didn’t have a hair put out of place. Lila looked perfect. Her clothes were perfect. Her face was still cherubic and her eyes were still a focal point in her face. Her freckles, which made her look merely cute when she was 9, now made her look fascinating, unique, contrasting against her skin.

How the hell did she manage to stay so pale? Helga thought, growling internally. How was her hair so fucking shiny? She was barely wearing makeup, no foundation, no acne scars, nothing! While she had filled out from her slender frame in the past, she filled out in all the right ways. And she looked frigging petite and sweet-looking and -

Okay, she really had to figure out what her issue was with Lila.

It wasn’t even like Lila had snubbed her in any way just now. When Lila saw her from across the square, she had let out one screech of glee as she bounced her way towards Helga, and threw herself into Helga’s arms, who hugged back a little more reluctantly. She had then started chattering at her excitedly, and all Helga could do was nod, smile and reply, “Ah yes!”
It wasn’t as though Helga wasn’t listening. She just wasn’t super used to people chattering that quickly at her at such a high speed. Also, Lila was very, very chatty.

“I’m ever so glad to see you back in Hillwood, Helga!” She had squealed. Then she blushed. “I’m sorry, I don’t like going back to old childhood habits. I’m not a country girl anymore, well I am, but-“

Arnold had laughed and patted Lila on the shoulder, “Aren’t you a mother now?”

Lila had put on a faux scowl and said, “Hey, mister, just because I have a son doesn’t mean that I am still the same age as you, at least I’m nothing like Mrs Ramirez!” The both of them had laughed, and a bemused Helga was left standing there, looking awkward until Arnold hastened to clarify. “Ah, Mrs Ramirez was a teacher back in high school that Lila and I had, she was so boring-“

“You had to be there! “Lila beamed.

Helga was a grown woman but boy she was tempted to throw things at Lila’s cheery face. Schooling her face into a face of concern, Helga said neutrally, “So what brings you to the Hillwood Cheese Festival?”

Lila waved a hand, “Oh, it’s a silly work thing. It’s really not super necessary, but they insisted that I had to be there -“

“Lila’s just been awarded Entrepreneur of the Year! “Arnold cut in, looking proud. “She’s been running an artisanal cheese business from her farm up in the country, and it’s popular with so many people for being organic!”

Lila blushed, and waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, it’s not such a big thing, though I am ever so proud of all the staff members in my team that work with me- “

“Oh my god, you’re Lila Sawyer-Thompkins!” a passer-by squealed. “You’re my favourite cheese maker!”

“Wait, is that Lila Sawyer?!”

“It is her, it is!”

Soon Lila had been swarmed by a small crowd of people, and she was thanking the crowd for supporting her all these years, all while Arnold and Helga stood by the sides, waiting for her to finish.

“Holy shit, I thought you said she runs a cheese business! “Helga blurted out. She never thought she would ever be jealous of someone on their popularity and getting rushed at by a crowd of admirers. She was now. “Why are they holding her up like a queen?”

Emrick the redheaded judge walked by, looking confused at the crowd until he saw Lila and gasped. “Lila Sawyer is here? I thought the gossip about her making Entrepreneur of the Year was untrue!”

“There was gossip? “Arnold asked.

“Of course there was,” said Emrick, turning to look at the speaker and beaming in response. “Oh, it’s you, Arnold!” Emrick grinned. He took one look at Arnold, and Helga next to him, and his eyes
Arnold looked like he was about to say something but Helga cut him off, eager to hear about what happened that made Lila Sawyer blessed amongst the cheesemakers. “You know anything about her? Tell me everything!”

Emrick who looked like he was about to laugh, straightened his face as he turned to address Helga. “She’s only the youngest business owner ever to win the award, that’s what! She’s changing up on how people are looking at cheese and cheese making, using technology that’s both ethical and efficient with the animals, and she makes the best cheese in the tri-state area!”

Wowed by the fact that Lila had achieved so much in her youth, Helga could only utter, “Woah.” Her achievements felt paltry in comparison. She clearly wasn’t a millionaire at the age of 30, and despite having a sizable cushion in her bank account from all the hustling she did writing-wise, she was still after all living in an apartment with her drag queen roommate in an affordable apartment with rent and utilities split two-ways.

“Oh, and she’s better than those sharks out there who only want to make money out of the artisanal cheese business! “Emrick continued. “She actually gives back! The only reason why she’s not a billionaire by now is the fact that she pays her staff great wages, and most of her staff are from women’s shelters looking for work!”

Lila Sawyer was actually helping women make a living? Now Helga was feeling even worse off. She had always thought that her organizing marches and speaking out for people’s rights was something she did well, but here was Lila actually giving people a working wage and helping women in shelters start a whole new life.

“She’s got fans from far and wide-“Emrick’s voice trailed off as a group of people on horses raced towards Lila and some men got off. They were dressed in old modest farming clothes, wide-brimmed hats, and the crowd, fascinated, parted to let three of the men through. They reached Lila, and one took off his hat to reveal a burly man with greying curly hair, his eyes brimming with tears.

“ Lila Sawyer, you are a great English Woman. “The man declared loudly. “We have travelled far and wide to come and see you and thank you for the great work you’ve done in our community.”

Lila looked shocked but she recovered quickly to smile and say, “Jonah Goodman!” she called out. “I have not seen you for many months! How was your journey?”

“Aye, we’ve lost a few good men on the road from Pennsylvania, “he sighed. “Amos Fisher is dead, and he was around 5 and 90-“

“Oh no!” Lila gasped.

“Yes, it is a tragedy… we have taken a few long hard months on the road…some of our men are dead, “and now the man was outright crying. So were the other men in the party. “But to see you, the great Lila Sawyer, the only English woman we will deal with for all our cheese making, it was worth it!”

Ah, fuck me. Helga thought. Even the fucking Amish love her? This was way too farcical. How was this real life? Was this even real life? Sometimes she felt she was living in a cartoon of some sort.

Helga turned to look at Arnold, who was currently engaged in a deep, whispered conversation with
Emrick, who looked extremely delighted while Arnold looked resigned and red-faced.

She rolled her eyes.

It made sense, then. If even Emrick had figured it out (how the hell did he and Arnold know each other anyway?), then it was obvious Arnold had a thing for Lila Sawyer.

She was glad, in a way. She did say that Arnold needed a good person to get together with, and Lila Sawyer was, if the information served right, the best person. She would be great for him.

So why was she feeling downright irritable at the possible idea of Arnold and Lila?

“I knew it!” Emrick said, giggling slightly to himself. “She’s cute though, I have to admit. No wonder you’re trying to woo her—“

“I am not wooing Helga oh my god—“ Arnold said. Helga was currently staring into space, a slight frown wrinkling her features. It was kinda adorable. Thank god she wasn’t paying attention to what was going on, it would have been really embarrassing if she had ever found out he had feelings for her like that.

“But it’s her, isn’t it?” Emrick said lowly, eyes dancing with mischief. “The blonde? I like her, she looks pretty solid, like she can take on anything—“

“She can.” Arnold agreed before his brain rebooted and he realised what that answer implied. “And it’s not her!”

“You liar.” Emrick nudged him, laughing.

“Yeah, fine, it was a lie,” Arnold muttered. Then, “What are you doing here anyway?”

Emrick brightened up. “I have a talk about new cheese food items that will ultimately change the world! Have you heard of the Avocado Cheese Smoothie?”

Before Arnold could comment on how ludicrous cheese was as a beverage choice, Lila had hurried back to the group and Helga, who was still staring into space, snapped back to attention. Emrick too realised it was getting late and the other judges had to rush back to the rest of their judging duties so he grabbed a confused Helga, and promised to bring her back to Arnold’s arms, safe and sound.

Arnold blanched at the thought of Helga in his arms, and Lila softly giggled as they both watched a confused, protesting Helga being marched against her will towards the cheese fashion show.

Lila elbowed him slightly. “She’s so pretty, Arnold. No wonder you like her.”

“I don’t love her cause of how pretty she is, Lila,” Arnold said absently before he realised, once again, that he had spoken before thinking again. “I don’t. Erm. Love her, that is—“

“No no,” Lila said sweetly, a devious look in her eye. “You mentioned love, it makes sense now, and all in all, I’m happy for you!”

Arnold groaned. When he had bumped into Lila earlier, the two had made wonderful, civil small talk that two friends made when they hadn’t seen or heard from each other for a long time. Lila had long moved to the countryside with her husband when they first got married, and she and Arnold had not seen each other for a good 3 years, until he heard that Lila’s husband had died, leaving a bereaved
Lila and her son Swayer. Lila had appreciated the gesture and they became Facebook friends, sometimes dropping each other a message to see what was going on, but very infrequently.

When Lila had asked what Arnold was doing at the Cheese Festival, Arnold had accidentally blurted out that he was here with somebody, and Lila, who was still smiling, had replied, “Oh yes, I did hear about your recent courtship, how is Helga doing?’’

“How did you know I was here with Helga?’’

Why, Nadine and I talk on the phone, sometimes. She tells me about work, and since you’re her colleague, Arnold…Well, your name does come up once or twice, or several times…”

That last bit was emphasized a lot more differently, and with a huge beam. Arnold could have sworn she was doing it to play with him and his psyche.

“And I am not courting her-“

“You’re so sweet and modest on this, but that is not what I heard!” Lila sang out. “Show me the way, I need to see her.”

She had then grabbed his arm and started pulling him towards a certain direction. Arnold, who wanted to point out the irony of someone asking for directions and yet leading the way, decided that protesting was out of the question.

She finally located Helga amongst the sea of faces, and she giggled, “Nadine wasn’t kidding when she said Helga looked great.” She tilted her head to grin at Arnold. “No wonder you like her-“

“Lila, stop getting all your info from Nadine, she’s not really the most trustworthy of people-“

Lila paused, and her eyes softened. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be teasing you like this…”

Good ol’ Lila, you could count on her to be a bit more sensitive to someone’s feelings.

“I should have said, love. Cause you did mention love just now, using the word, ‘like’ is belittling the feelings you have for Helga.” She said understandingly.

Good lord, when even Lila made fun of him, life was a horrible, horrible thing.

The man, spluttering, was about to protest when Lila held up a finger to his face.

“It has been awhile, Arnold, but we did date for a month or so, and I like to think I know you a little more than anyone else.” Lila had said patiently. “Also, I do wish you the best, and Helga too…and I do declare Helga is looking smart in that blazer.” As the both of them made their way towards her Helga, Lila had turned to nudge Arnold in the arm, and whispered, “If you’re going to marry her, can Sawyer and I be invited to the wedding?”

Arnold was not blushing. At this point, he had gone past blushing and was now in a whole new level of humiliation and self-consciousness. He might call it the HumiSelfCon, and people would pay tickets to go in and listen to him do a talk on how embarrassed he was. It wouldn’t be a stand-up act but people would react to it like it was.. “We’re -I.”

“Let me guess, you haven’t even told her yet?” Lila had then laughed. She was way too amused about the situation.
“You’re supposed to be my ex, Lila. Why are you way too amused about this situation?” Grumbled an embarrassed Arnold.

“Because I think you and Helga would make an adorable couple, and she’s a good person. I think you and her would be good for each other.” Lila replied glibly.

Arnold had then groaned and Lila, who had been cheerfully ignoring him, squealed and ran right up to Helga, hugging the hell out of her.

“So Helga,” Lila was now asking sweetly. “Where are you staying at the moment? I would love to get lunch with you, catch up a bit.”

Helga was very thrown off by the entire situation. What was going on? Why was Lila, the girliest of all girls, business owner extraordinaire and possible future Apprentice winner, asking her, Helga Pataki, scruffy author, noted walking disaster and hot mess, to lunch? Oh god was this going to be fancy lunch? With mimosas? Holy shit was this BRUNCH?

“Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh.” said Helga, drawing out the syllable so that it seemed more like a conversation than what it really was. “Why not, sure?” She glanced back at Arnold, hoping against all hope for some sort of support. “You’re coming too right?”

“Nope! ”Lila sang out before the man could reply. “You and I are having a ladies’ lunch! No guys allowed!”

Ah fuck. Of course, she couldn’t have a lifeline for lunch. Of course. To seal the deal of misfortune maybe they could have lunch at the café she and Olga went to the first time.

Fuck, it would just be her luck if Olga dropped by or something. Cause well, she couldn’t have nice things. Cause she was Helga Pataki.

Lila clasped hands with Helga, eyes shining wide and bright. Helga was pretty sure she had accidentally stumbled into a reboot of Anne of Green Gables, cause the red-headed heroine was just as daffy and cheerful as the woman currently holding her hands.

“Oh it’s just ever so great to see you, and honestly I cannot wait to have lunch, we have to get details!” Lila took out her phone, and started flicking through her apps, “I would love to have your contact number!” She gasped. “We could be texting buddies!”

Ah hell no. No way. Lila was joking, right?

Judging by the way she was waving her phone around, probably not.

“Oh, even better! Gimme your digits, and I can give you a missed call so you can have mine! I’m so terrible with getting numbers right so I like to test new numbers out when I get new contacts!” Lila continued.

Crap, she couldn’t even give her a fake number to dodge her, what with Arnold the great servant of the nation standing by looking affable and shit. She couldn’t be mean to his possible girlfriend. So Helga gave up and rattled off her digits, all while a smiling Lila happily entered them in, then called her phone. Helga reluctantly held her phone up to show Lila that yes, she did indeed get the correct number.
“Perfect!” Lila squealed, still happily waving her phone. “I’ll call you, or you’ll call me…no I’ll call you!” Her phone took that as a signal and vibrated, causing the redhead to look back at the screen. She winced. “Ah, phooey. I have to go, you guys. But It was ever so amazing to see y’all!” She waved cheerily as she left, her skirts swirling behind her.

A confused Helga looked at Arnold to see if he too was as confused as she was.

“Well.” Arnold started, then stopped. He opened his mouth, closed it and finally shrugged, a small embarrassed smile on his face. “Well, wasn’t that…something?”

Helga internally rolled her eyes, though she did feel a small smile creep on her lips. Well, it made sense that Arnoldo would be at a loss for words. Having that much woman brush past him like a moving storm and yet smelling exactly like a fresh garden would be overwhelming for a normal guy, especially if the woman was Lila Sawyer-Thompkins.

Well, that settled it.

If Arnoldo was going to look like that, all earnest and sweet and embarrassed and cute like that, who was she to stand in his way? She did want the best for him after all, and if Lila was the one, then fuck her uneasiness. She would help him by talking him up to Lila. She would even take lunch with her wholeheartedly just so she could have an opportunity to do so.

She took a deep breath, and grinned. “Yes, it was!”

She was going to act as Arnold Shortman’s wingperson and wingpersoning would be her game!

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“So.” Helga whispered hotly, later, tilting her head in confusion. “What are we…what?”

Arnold agreed, tilting his head too in the same vein she was. It was honestly the best he could do considering the circumstances, “Well, I suppose some people call it…art?”

Helga squinted. It was the 5th time she had done so in the last few minutes, “I mean, I’ve seen some hipster things,” She whispered back. “I performed in hipster tea houses, for fuck’s sake. This—” She gestured at the makeshift stage they were all looking at. “Is…some sort of…who thought about this?!”

They were both sitting together in the audience, looking at the sole performer on stage, who was dressed in a full black onesie, face painted blue and red against a canvas of white. The performer wore a mournful expression on their face when they had walked out on stage, and continued looking so all while they stepped up on a small raised platform, which then sagged trying to hold the person’s weight.

Arnold, who was used to the eccentricities of the boarding house, and had seen some things as a teacher working in P.S. 118, thought he was prepared for anything.

However, he was not prepared for…this.

“Okay, I think I get what’s happening.” He whispered back. “The dancer represents someone struggling to get back on their feet, and the cheese they are standing on is society trying to support them, but it’s not steady enough, so the cheese platform sags and melts under the weight, and they fall down…”
“Yeah, that explains the song choice,” Helga muttered, as an orchestral strings cover of Tubthumping by Chumbawumba played in the background. “But why are they…even doing this?”

“Beats me.” He whispered back. He really had no idea what the Cheese Festival had become, to be fairly honest.

Earlier on they had sat through two performances of vaguely pretentious art, where one performer had painted the word, “Cheese” all over her naked body while reciting poetry, and another made music using cheese sticks (Arnold still had no idea how that worked.)

Watching the really pretentious art was near aggravating, but luckily Helga was willing to make fun of the performances, and he had joined in, giving his own colour commentary.

It was rather fun, very much like their Friday Night Movie Club. The two of them sitting in the dark, watching people make fools of themselves, making a vague attempt to silence their laughter as they couldn’t help but be amused at the ludicrous display and their own quips. Arnold could safely say Helga was having fun, and he was showing that he was getting kinda cool with it.

The two of them continued watching the dancer as the plaintive tune changed into a slightly more peppy one, one that Arnold couldn’t name exactly but knew he had heard it somewhere. The dancer too changed pace, and the face was now exuberant, cheerful, manic, dancing with highkicks, rolls on the floor now waxy and more slippery with cheese.”

“Do you know this song?” Arnold asked.

Helga nodded. “Yeah…but…” Her eyes widened. “Holy shit nooo.”

“What?” Arnold asked, but he got his answer when the dancer came out wielding a chair. “Flashdance.” He said, with wonder. “The music is from Flashdance. But then does that mean…”

“Holy shit, please let it be water, please let it be water.” Helga said, sitting on the edge of her seat.

But, just as Arnold had feared, two stage hands stood up, also dressed in black, and wielding buckets of creamy yellow liquid inside, and threw it on the dancer on stage, who had timed it well. The resounding screams left the audience gasping, and Arnold and Helga wincing in pain.

“They really should have let the cheese cool down first before throwing it on the poor thing.” Arnold muttered.

“I don’t understand what I’m watching.” Helga said faintly.

The two of them looked at each other.

“Let’s sneak out.” Said Arnold.

“What, now?” Helga asked, looking bewildered.

“Yeah, let’s blow this joint.” Arnold insisted. He grabbed her hand, and led her out of the stage area, where luckily, in the ensuing chaos, no one had noticed that they were leaving.

“But why are we doing this?” Helga said faintly. “I gotta…judge things.”
“Come on, Helga.” Arnold said. A feeling was coming over him, a heady rush of impulsiveness. “Clearly, this is not the Cheese Festival we remembered. No one will notice, and honestly we’ll have a better time than here.”

Helga looked askance at him, then shrugged, “Lead the way.”

The two of them marched out of the Cheese Festival to the parking lot, and Arnold’s head, now feeling a little less rash, was coming down from the high, and he realised he had absolutely no idea where he wanted to take her. Well, it was less a lack of ideas and more of possibilities bouncing everywhere. Where could they go? A fancy restaurant? A night club? Slaughhsen-?

“Oh fuck, Arnoldo, look!” Helga pointed, “A taco truck!”

Tacos. Hm.

“Ah fuck, come on, I am sick of the cheese and the fat cats in there. I could do with some red meat.” Helga said, dragging him behind her. It was then that Arnold realised two things:

1) Helga’s hand was smaller than his but a much stronger grip, and
2) He had not let go of her hand since they had left.

His face could honestly melt the entire cheese collection in the Cheese Festival and still have some heat left over to burn the tacos in the taco truck.

Helga, bless her happy taco loving heart, had not noticed, only letting go of his hand when they had reached the taco truck. He looked down at his hand, a gleeful sort of silliness ranging all over him.

She held hands with me.

She held HANDS WITH ME.

Helga Pataki held HANDS. And we went in a certain direction. To a food place. With me!

Is this a date now? Was this a date? That’s what a date was right?

“Aw yas, they even have that melted artificial cheese all over!” Helga crowed, still studying the menu, not knowing of the inner turmoil she had spun over his heart. “Fuck yeah, meat and cheese and meat and cheese and meat and cheese-“

Arnold realised he had to say something vaguely responsive, so he made a small noise of agreement as he took out his phone to message Gerald.

GERALD! He typed out.

The reply came back just as quickly. ARNOLD!

GERALD, WE HELD HANDS

HOLY FYUCK U TOLD HER U LIKED HER?! MY MAN IS SMOOTH AS FIYAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Erm. No.
What?!!?!?!!

I didn’t tell her I liked her that is …

Then WTF were U holding hands w/ her?! WHATCHU PLAYIN @.

I told her we were going somewhere else, it was impulsive and I grabbed her hand and stuff and well yeah

SON I TOLD U DIS WAS THE NIGHT TO TRY AND SHOW HER U WANT TO BE HER BF.

I CAN’T DO THAT. HOW DO I DO THAT?!

Easy, take yr shirt, stroke it, and say out loud…” Hm… this shirt is like U, and feels important and prized, You could say this is…bae material.”

I AM NOT-

“Football Head!” Helga yelled out. “I’m buying you a taco and two beers! You cool?”

“Yeah!” Arnold yelled back, stowing his phone back into his trouser pocket.

He was going to steadfastedly ignore his phone if his best friend was going to offer him negativity like that.

“Holy shit, dude.” Helga laughed. “I can’t believe how the night turned out.” She took a swig of her beer, and leaned back. “From the fancy schmancy Cheese Festival to us hobo-ing it in the harbour along with beers and tacos. We are clearly not suited to the high-life.”

The two of them had found a bench near the old jetty, and sat down, drinking their beers and wolfing down their tacos. While it was still the weekend, the jetty was unnaturally quiet, with only the heavy beats of the club music playing out of The Slash Shipyard located a while away.

Arnold nodded, closing his eyes and heaving a heavy sigh. “Well, yeah. I honestly don’t know what happened, and I’m sorry about that—"

“Don’t be!” Helga said, taking a bite out of her taco. Damn, roast meat was the absolute best. “I dragged you there and we had a bad time, I should thank you for convincing me to leave.”

“Well, it wasn’t so bad.” Arnold said, eyes half-lidded and looking up at the sky. “It’s a beautiful night, and the company wasn’t so bad.” He smiled at her. “I’ve had worse dates than this.”

He then froze. “Not that…this was a date or—"

“Ah, you loser, Arnoldo!” she laughed. His fluster was adorable. She already knew that he wasn’t interested in her in that way, so there wasn’t any need to cover up like that.

She took another bite of her taco, chewing thoughtfully. Maybe this was the way to start. Talk to him about dating. Then somehow get Lila into the conversation or something. Start with embarrassing details of her own dates, get him comfortable enough to talk it out, and then try to figure out what kind of girls he liked.
“Bet mine was worse.” Helga started, shifting into a more comfortable position. “I once dated a Nazi by accident.”

Arnold looked shocked. “For real?”

“Yeap,” she said, washing her taco down with a sip of beer. “He was in my German Literature class. He asked me out, I thought he was cute, so we agreed to go to a German restaurant for dinner, and he got angry when the hostess that took us to our table was a black woman. He then spouts some bullshit about white people first, I got angry, and punched him in the face. Then I left before the first course.”

Arnold nodded, looking faintly impressed. “Damn.”

“Damn straight.” She said.

They both took a sip of their beer.

“I think the worst date I ever had was when the woman turned out to be a parent of one of my students.” Arnold said thoughtfully. “She kept asking if I was interested in a private PTA meeting. It was just...awkward as hell.”

“Awkward?” Helga said, laughing a little. “You? Never!”

“Helga, I once was in a relationship with a woman for 6 months because I couldn’t say no to her.” He said. “I thought I was open to anything in a relationship, but she kept making me do things I wasn’t actually prepared for.”

Helga’s eyes widened. “Woah, no shit? Like what?”

Arnold looked really embarrassed, “Well, erm-“

“Holy shit!” Helga laughed. “It was some kinky shit, wasn’t it?”

Arnold buried his face in his hands. “I’m not a prude or anything!” He moaned. “I’m just...she kept calling me Mr Grey!”

Dear lord, this was both hilarious and horrifying. “Oh good god, was she obsessed with-“

“Fifty Shades of Grey, yes.” Arnold said ruefully.

Helga shrieked with laughter.

“Yeah yeah, laugh it all you want.” Arnold said. “I mean...she was not the best, and then there were others but well...I don’t want to seem like I’m not adventurous or a prude or a boring person. I just...well. I like relying on the classics.”

Helga wiped tears from her eyes, forcing herself to pay attention. This was good, this was good.

They were going towards great conversation topics. “Well, then, tell me!” She cajoled, bumping his shoulder. “Tell me what you like in a first date!”

Arnold was so quiet that Helga thought she may have offended him. Then he took a sip of beer, swallowed heavily, and said. “Well. I like to go to the basics. Dinner, maybe a movie, maybe even a
nice carnival or festival. We would be awkward at first, because honestly, I get so tongue-tied over someone I like that I can never figure out the right things to say so I focus on the minute things like making sure everything is alright, whether her seat was comfortable, was she feeling okay, did she need a jacket…”

Helga nodded, absorbing everything he said. This was perfect, already he and Lila seemed perfect for the scenario he’d just painted. Though it was a little weird hearing that he got so self-conscious. She had taken so much video of him being himself and observing him that he had never looked embarrassed at anything he did. But things could change.

“Then well, it would be great if we loosened up, and just… laughed a bit.” He said.

Helga frowned a little, wrinkling her brow. Laughing? Hm. Lila did seem like she would laugh at any little thing Arnold would do, but she wasn’t exactly the kind of person that was organically funny. Arnold liked dry humour, though he wasn’t above making fun of things that were absolutely ludicrous and silly. Watching horrible movies and making fun of pretentious acting and dialogue was their thing, after all. Arnold was really hilarious. He always did back when he was a kid, and he still was, despite the fact that he covered it up by being a model pillar of society.

“Yeah, like, we could watch a good movie, or a bad one.” He continued. “Nothing too serious. I like hearing or seeing my date have a good time, and if not, I would…well…try to change it up.” He turned to look at her. “Like get out of the place, do whatever she wanted.”

Helga took another sip of beer. Classic Arnold, always making sure his date was doing okay. “Well, yeah, that’s you all over.” She said. She was feeling really good right now, comfortable, warm, really content and relaxed. The harbour, lit up enough to see the boats go by, but dark that the stars were still able to shine brightly, was beautiful, she thought.

“Yeah.” Arnold said quietly. “I could… well. We could take a walk. Go somewhere private, somewhere nice. I like the harbour sometimes, or the park maybe. We could hold hands, we could sit down, we could talk about anything and everything. We could just…be us. It would be two of us just sitting there, with no other people but ourselves, and we could talk for ages, or we could sit in silence and it would be…” he paused there, looking up at the sky. “It would be magical.”

Helga smiled softly. Damn, Arnold was still a romantic soul. If she didn’t know any better her heart would have been fluttering up a storm right now. “That honestly sounds beautiful.” She said earnestly. Lila would be a lucky, lucky woman.

“I…think it is.” He said, still quietly. There was an odd tone to his voice, one that Helga didn’t realize but could feel seeping in. “I would turn to her…” To emphasize that, he looked her right in the eyes, and then said, “and I would say…”

It was probably the beer talking but something about Arnold’s expression right there made her feel… tense, like she was anticipating something. Her heart quickened by a beat.

“I would say…” Arnold repeated, like he wasn’t sure if he was using the correct words. “I think you’re beautiful. And I think you’re special. And I want us to have a chance. I am so glad we are together in this moment, in this time, so that we can have this chance.”

Helga’s heart felt like it was about to fall right out of her chest and on the cold hard ground, but she did not break eye contact with Arnold.
Damn, he had beautiful eyes.

Arnold, luckily, broke the contact first. His eyes crinkled and he pulled his head away, laughing softly to himself. “So yeah.” He said, a little reluctantly. “I would say that. To someone I liked.”

Helga looked away too, forcing a laugh that seemed a little too airy, too light in comparison to how she felt. “Wow, Shortman.” She said. “It’s as though you’re the writer or something!” If she kept it cool, she would be able to hide how uneasy, how dizzy, how self-conscious she felt. Luckily Arnold didn’t reply, he was now gazing out to the ocean, looking contemplative.

She was determined not to fall into past mistakes. She had misinterpreted feelings before, and she had hurt herself and other people because of it. She didn’t know anything with regards to Arnold’s behaviour, this was information she had not processed before, this was all meaningless data, data, data, pushed by her overreactive imagination. Words didn’t mean a thing. Arnold had shown no indication that he had ever liked her, this was all hypothetical, all speculation.

She was not willing to go anywhere near this venture. This was absolutely nothing.

And as a famous Shakespeare play would state, nothing would come out of nothing. The man had alcohol, for god’s sake. People tended to get very flowery and very weird under the influence. Come morning, this would be laughed off. It would be a small period in a sentence already forgotten.

Arnold liked ….people that were not her. She knew that. She was fine with that. She had just that night resolved to help Arnold get together with Lila. And she was perfectly fine with that. Fine with that.

Fine fine fine fine fine fine fine fine fine fine fine fine fine.

If she repeated it to herself long enough, maybe her brain would get the message easier.
“And then?” a voice demanded in Helga’s ear, sounding unusually annoyed. “What happened then?”

“Nothing.” Helga said, quietly. “Nothing happened. It got a bit awkward, we ate our tacos, we made light chit chat, my soul started disintegrating. we then went back to the apartment. We said good night, and now I am here, chatting with you.”

Phoebe made a noise like an angry cat.

“You did ask me to report to you what happened.” Said Helga absently. She was curled upright on the couch, the blankets surrounding her as she gazed out the window in the living room. Nights in the city were unique all on their own, and she never wanted to admitted it, but she missed looking out the windows at Hillwood, especially at night. Milltown was nice, but Hillwood had a special sort of feeling all of its own. She figured it was the beer talking, though it had been some time since she had finished the bottle.

“Whaddya think?” she continued, feeling her head lean against the couch. The old leather was smooth and well-worn, kinda comforting on her warm face. Maybe the couch could be her friend.

Phoebe sighed. “Helga, I wished I knew the answer to this. Right now he seems to be giving off mixed signals, and I just wish I was there to be able to observe everything fully. The information you’re giving me certainly does suggest he has strong feelings about someone. What you are feeling though…” she paused, as though she was taking her time to figure out the correct words for what she was about to say next. “Is it possible you may have residual feelings for Arnold?”

“Course not!” Helga said with determination. It was possible she lied there, but it was choices that mattered, and not the truth. “What I’m currently feeling is just me trying to get closure for my insolent childhood days. Nothing more.”

She did think that not telling Phoebe the absolute truth was a bit troubling, but she quashed it.

“Well, if you’re sure.” Phoebe said. Helga could practically feel the doubt in those five syllables. Stupid best friend knowing her too well and everything. So she decided to be a little more truthful about the situation.

“Phoebe, I’m scared.” Helga said.

“What about?” Phoebe asked. There were sounds of shuffling, as though Phoebe was shifting things around.

“I…was overbearing and nearly forced feelings on Arnold a few times back then.” Helga admitted. “Like, remember FTi? When he caught me at the rooftop asking me why I was helping him? I was so so close to confessing everything to him. About how I loved him to the moon and back, and that my happiness was linked to his and how I wanted forever with him. Thank god I didn’t, thank god Gerald interrupted us on the speakers before anything really happened, and I basically snapped at him to get a move on. Imagine the consequences. I could have told him I wanted to like…lie down
next to him and that he was my soul mate. Or something. “

She knew she told Phoebe what happened then and Phoebe never judged, but it still sounded cringey when she heard it all back. Man, her younger self was embarrassing as hell.

“ I nearly pinned all my hopes on this one kid being the one.” She said. “ At age nine? That’s ridiculous and horrible. He didn’t and wasn’t the solution to my problems. I’m just… ” she stopped, and started again. “ My feelings are way too intense.” She said. “ And they’re irrational. Nothing makes sense. Everything is just sensation and emotion and events. I don’t have insight, and I react instead of think. I don’t want to be like that, I don’t want to be over-reliant on my guts. I want to be smart about this. I want to treat him like how I treat you guys. I want him and I to be friends. No expectations. If something like this happens and I throw caution to the wind again, and it turns out I was wrong?”

She stopped in an effort to swallow the lump in her throat. Coughed. Then she tried again.

“ I would be back there.” She said quietly. “ Back to the quiet, numb place. Cause once again, feelings got me in trouble and it will drag me back there into that horrible mindspace where I hated myself and I just can’t afford- I’m better now. I want to always be better than what I was back then.”

Back when her emotional outbursts hurt people. Back when her need for affection drove her family away from her. Back when her inability to control her emotions meant that she hurt herself.

Phoebe didn’t speak for awhile. Helga could hear her sigh though and a horrible voice in her head blamed her once again for making Phoebe worry about her from so far away. She had to hit that thought aside. Phoebe had told her time and time again that she was someone she loved, and that worrying about her was going to be a given.

“ Helga. ” Phoebe finally asked. “ Did I ever tell you what happened after Gerald and I broke up? And why we did it?”

Helga straightened up a bit. “ Yeah, you mentioned you and he mutually agreed it was okay, because you both were going your separate ways and in separate colleges. It didn’t make sense for either of you to try and maintain a long distance relationship.”

Phoebe sighed. “ I lied.”

Helga had to scoff because the idea of Phoebe and Gerald breaking up for any other reason was ludicrous. They had always been the serious couple, the one that would make it through anything, and if they had broken up, it would be a mutual one. “ Liar.”

“ Helga-“

“ I mean, you and Tall-Hair boy? You suggesting the break up?” Helga continued. “ Phoebe, you’re the sweetest marshmallow alive. You’re the one who never says boo to a ghost. You’re my absolutest best friend, and you’ve taught me the softest areas on where to stab someone, but you won’t lie about a relationship like that-“

“ Helga, please listen to me. I didn’t lie. It was only part of the reason why we broke up. And we’ve always said it was mutual because ultimately it was but I was the one who suggested it and he had to be talked around to it. “
Now that was a shock. “Wha...how?” Helga asked slowly, now sitting up, throwing the covers off her. If what Phoebe said was true, nothing made sense. “That can’t be right! You were super upset when that happened! We spent one whole night talking about how upset you were that it had to happen!”

“I know, I know,” Phoebe said, and this stopped Helga a little from the indignation, Phoebe sounded utterly miserable. “I did it. I made it happen. It was my fault it happened—“

Helga grabbed the blankets back around her again, cuddling up against the sofa. If she was going to hear this, she might as well listen to what happened. “Okay, fine. Tell me everything.”

Phoebe was silent for so long Helga had to check if she had hung up by accident. Then, a shaky breath, a small sound that sounded like she was swallowing more air, and Phoebe spoke up. “It was partly because of dad.”

Helga frowned. Kyo made Phoebe break up with Gerald? “I don’t follow.” She said flatly.

Phoebe sighed. “I never mentioned this. But dad thought the relationship was going to fail.”

That didn’t make sense. Kyo, while austere, was the nicest, kindest man alive. He was the one who partly saved Eugene from losing any hope in society as a gay teenager who loved Broadway and dresses. He had raised Phoebe the sweetest, most sensible kid ever, and he had always treated Helga with absolute kindness. This was the man she always wanted to be her own father. “I...how?” she asked.

“Well, dad came into my room one day, and he was asking me about colleges, future paths, things...” Phoebe started. “Then he asked me about Gerald.”

Helga’s eyes widened. “And...?” she asked.

Phoebe sighed again. “Long story short, he asked me if I was sure about dating Gerald, because statistically speaking, only 2% of new marriages in North America were comprised of high school sweethearts, and even then they fail because of reasons stemming from things such as changing of priorities, and 54% of high school sweethearts divorce with the first 10 years. He was worried that since Gerald and I were vastly different people, it made sense that we might not have the same goals, or the same ideals, or even the same priorities. He told me that while he supported any decision I made, he didn’t think Gerald and I would make it. Our realities were too different.”

Helga winced. That sounded heavy.

“The next day, I asked Gerald, casually, about his college plans. He was happily talking about how much he wanted to make films, how to edit and tell stories, and elevate stories, and I just sat there, looking at him. I realised that it wasn’t right keeping him with me. He needed to travel, he needed to meet new people.—Phoebe cut herself off there before she forced herself to continue. “Meet women. Women more like him, and could provide the time and love he deserved. I couldn’t do that. I had looked up medical school hours, the number of years and hours I would be dedicating—I couldn’t...submit him to that. If we broke up later in life, because he thought I was lacking in passion, that I didn’t want to put in the effort...It would make me so angry. It made me angry at the possibility that I would be the cause of him being miserable, so I just...broke it to him. There and then. It felt easier to do it then than later before anything got too serious, or too late.”

Helga mulled over what Phoebe said, and fuck if it wasn’t heavy, That shit sounded horrible.
Phoebe continued, after a pause. “He kept begging me to not do that. He wanted to understand. I told him, I pleaded with him to understand why it wouldn’t work. He was stubborn and kept saying that he would be faithful, we would make it. I didn’t think it would, so I … had to clam up my feelings up. Told him point blank how it wouldn’t work. I somehow convinced him, with my stats and my theories and all the case studies, that it really wouldn’t last, and it was best for the both of us. He only agreed to us breaking up when he asked for it to officially happen after graduation.”

Phoebe’s voice sounded heavy, tired. It had occurred to Helga that Phoebe had just finished a 16-hour shift at the hospital earlier that day. Being a neurosurgeon, while lucrative, was still tiring as hell, and required patience, skill, and mental capabilities that would exhaust anyone.

Helga asked because she really wanted to know. “Do you regret it?” she asked.

Phoebe laughed, a rueful, tired one. “Sometimes.” She admitted. “I made the decision to break up with someone solely because in a way I didn’t want to be a statistic. I didn’t want us to have to go through that kind of shit, and it was … hurtful. It didn’t make sense to hurt someone so badly, and numbers simply didn’t add up. When I look at us now, I think I did the right thing. But sometimes…I just wonder. What happened if I didn’t let my big brain get in the way. If I relied on emotions instead of just my head. What if I had faith in this man, my first love. It leads to a stretch of things that I really have no energy to think about.”

Helga sat there, feeling the words weigh on her. Then she laughed. “Look at us, Pheebs.” She said. “I’m afraid of my emotions getting at me, and you’re afraid of your brain getting at you. Everything about us is levels of screwed up.”

Phoebe laughed too. “It is indeed ludicrous.”

“How are we adults again?” Helga asked.

“Age, and society’s perception of what being mature and of age is.” Phoebe supplied the answer quickly. “Age is just a number, and it doesn’t teach us ANYTHING about how to manage ourselves and our lives. We just…go along with the flow.”

“An astute observation, Doctor,” Helga said wryly.

“So what are you going to do?” Phoebe asked quietly.

“Sleep on it.” Helga said promptly. “I can’t think about this now. I got a text from Mrs Lila Sawyer-Thompkins that we are having brunch tomorrow at 11am, and the emotional energy I have to summon just to be around her is enormous, let alone be my friend’s wingman. I need all the rest I can get so I can be my absolute winning, charming self. Also I need mimosas. They have alcohol in it, right?”

“I do believe so, yes.”

“Perfecto.” Helga murmured, snuggling back under the blankets. “In any case, I need to be up early so that I can look bright-eyed and busy tailed for Ms Perfect.”

“Helga, you know she’s not the world’s most perfect woman…” Phoebe said, but her voice had a hint of a smile in it.

“Fuck that.” Helga said. “Ms Perfect is the ultimate woman warrior, who also happens to look like if Emma Stone and that girl from Crimson Peak had a baby. Also, may I repeat again? PERFECT
SKIN. Like a fucking peach. And she’s a fucking mother.”

“I must admit, that does sound compelling,” Phoebe said wistfully. “I always did envy her, you know? She was always so popular and kind. I never understood how someone could be both, and do it to such aplomb.”

“You and me both, Pheebers.” Said Helga, lying back and looking out the window, where the moon, though obscured, could still be seen behind the townhouses. “You and me both.”

Helga was late to the café Lila had suggested for their brunch.

Technically it wasn’t her fault. She had woken up 9 am, just as she had planned, but then she realised Arnold was also awake at the point in time, stirring coffee in the kitchen and looking up at her expectantly when she fumbled out of the couch covered in blankets. She had muttered some sort of greeting and made her way to the bathroom to do her morning business, trying to wake herself up. When she had left the bathroom, she realised Arnold was still in the kitchen, sipping his coffee, and they had both exchanged some sort of weird awkward morning talk as though they were strangers. She tried to break the awkwardness by making jokes, and then was so committed to it that by the time they finished coffee, they were acting as though nothing had happened.

Then she looked up at the time and realised she was going to be late, and she had done nothing else besides joking around with Arnold.

So a shower, change of clothes, a bit of makeup and flipping her hair around trying to get it dry, and she was out the door, yelling something out to Arnold that was akin to, “HOMYGOD I AM SO LATE FUCKING HELL I AM SO SORRY!”

Okay, when she thought about it, she had to concede that perhaps it was her fault she was late.

Luckily, she got an Uber that got her to the destination only 10 minutes late. That was a record. She threw a 5 dollar bill as a tip at the Uber driver for managing that, and opened the car door, running a hand through her hair.

Eurgh, her hair was still wet.

She was pretty sure she was sweating despite the cold air and the wet hair, and now that she looked down at herself properly, she realised she was wearing a wrinkled shirt along with a pair of jeans without a top button.

She pulled the shirt down to cover up evidence that she really wasn’t a proper adult, tossed her hair back, and walked into the café.

She quickly regretted everything about her life choices.

Cause Lila, sitting at a table outside, dressed a soft looking jacket that looked comfortable but expensive, her hair in a long, elegant braid, was beautiful.

Why the criminy fuckwits was she dressed like a hobo when Lila looked like she had stepped out of a magazine page for Horse and Carriage? She looked like an unpaid intern about to sit with her rich boss. Fuckity fuckwits, her hair was still wet, but drying as though she had frizzy ropes in her hair. Also, did she remember to put on deodorant before she left? Would it be too obvious to sniff herself just to check?
Maybe she could go home, pretend she forgot about brunch…she could fake being sick right?

“Helga!” Lila squealed, waving her hand in greeting. “Over here!”

Damnit why was everything against her today? Helga huffed and tried her best not to look like she was stomping as she made her way over.

Up close, in bright daylight, Lila looked as luminous as she did the night before. Any hope Helga had of Lila looking diminished in natural sunlight was lost, because Lila Fucking Sawyer was, of all the tragedies in the world, a natural beauty.

Helga had to fight her irritability from coming out and ruining any sort of civility or goodwill she accrued the day before. She liked Lila now, remember? No trying to hurt the woman just because she brought out every single insecurity she had ever had, including her ability to get along with people, look graceful while doing it, and had the full attention of her childhood crushes. Lila was by all accounts a decent person.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve ordered some starters to share!” Lila beamed. “I read once you were interested in truffle fries, so I got that, but I wasn’t sure so the waiter gave us small portions of the fries they had!”

Fuck that, Lila Sawyer-Thompkins was clearly still a monster. What kind of power did she have over the waiters to get that much influence?

“I didn't realise you could do that,” Helga said, forcing a smile and keeping her voice calm and cool.

Lila looked bashful. “Well, you can’t,” she confessed. “I was in such a pickle earlier trying to figure out what to pick and the waiters were really nice about it, and since my business provides the cheese they use here for all their ingredients, the owners and I are friends, so…”

Gah, was Lila showing off? Helga had to slap herself mentally to stop herself from getting back to her old, defensive self. “That’s…pretty amazing!” she said through the forced smile, and she could feel a vein above her left eye twitch.

“It’s really nothing, honest!” Lila said. “Everyone’s just been so kind to me…”

Helga wanted to slam her head against the table now.

Fuck everything!

“So where is the lady in question, man?” Gerald asked, his face a little distorted from the angle his phone was looking up at.

“She’s out.” Arnold said shortly, “Went for a girls’ brunch thing with Lila. She ran out of the house screaming about things. “

Gerald shook his head.

Arnold was currently in the kitchen, on a video call with Gerald who was currently on his “work
“trip” that Rhonda conveniently gave him. Apparently, it was a work trip, cause Gerald was currently in…

“Washington State, son!” Gerald had crowed near the beginning of the call, bobbing his head as he did so, and Arnold could see stubble growing out of his chin. Clearly, Gerald hadn’t shaved for a few days, and it showed. “I’m covering the protests in the school, and everything is buzzing!”

“I can’t believe you left me in my time of need.” Arnold had said dryly. “Gerald, I think I screwed up.”

“What, how bad could you have screwed up?” Gerald then asked.

Arnold told him.

Gerald was quiet for a while, then he started yelling, “WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING AT SON?!”

“I know, I know!” Arnold had then wailed. “I don’t know, I don’t know! IT JUST HAPPENED.”

“Like, you told her about your feelings…and then you copped out?” Gerald yelled back. “Are you that guy from The Nanny?! Stop being such an ass on things!”

“It’s not like I wanted to!” Arnold moaned. “It just…it felt right, the beer was good, and then my head just went with it, and then suddenly I’m telling her about Connie and that PTA mom and then feelings just came out and she’s staring at me and I’m staring back and then I had to say something less awkward or it would have gone on forever and then the next day we’re just going on like nothing happened!”

Gerald made a noise like he had thrown himself face down against a pillow and screamed. Which was what actually did happen. Arnold saw the whole thing happen right on the phone screen. When he raised his head back up again, he still looked indignant, but more ready to listen to what his friend had to say. “So she didn’t say a word about what happened yesterday?”

Arnold shook his head. “Not a word. Just made a few jokes like nothing happened.”

“See, this is what happens when you do shit like that.” Gerald said. “You’re not clear with your feelings, you get wishy-washy about it, and then blam! No one gets it when you are trying to tell them you like them. How on earth did you get girls in the past?”

Arnold cast his mind back to old memories and past girlfriends. “I…honestly don’t know.” He admitted. “It just happened.”

Gerald groaned again. “Man, I just- what the hell- dude! You are the worst! You know she’s having brunch with one of your exes right?” He demanded. “Do you know what they’re gonna do? Lila’s going to mention she dated you for like a month or something, she’s probably going to share things, and Helga’s going to think you’re an idiot!”

“Gerald, I honestly don’t think that would happen,” Arnold said wryly.

“You don’t know how girls are!” Gerald said, waving his arms. “They talk! Lila’s going to ask Helga where she’s staying, Helga would say she’s staying with us, and then the floodgates will open! Lila’s going to mention she dated you, Helga’s going to want details, and they will laugh at your ass! Especially on how your head is like granite, cause you’re dense as hell!”
“Gerald.” Arnold shook his head, voice firm. “They’re not gossips. They’re not going to talk about me like that, it’s all in the past…”

“So how is it staying at Arnold and Gerald’s?” Lila asked, chewing on a sweet potato fry.

Helga paused, mid-chew. She had thrown a bunch of fries in her mouth after taking a liberal sip of her mimosa, and now her mouth was full of oily, potato-ey, crispy goodness. “Garbelsharhfic.” she mumbled before she swallowed, murmuring an apology before she tried again. “Good, they’re terrific.” She repeated.

“Oh really?” Lila asked. “Arnold and you doing okay? Nothing horrible so far?”

Wow, okay so Lila was starting off with the offensive, bringing up Arnold. She was obviously trying to know more about what he was up to, and this was a great opportunity to wingman the shit out of him. “Yeah, the man is amazing.” she said, with practiced ease. “He’s been a great host, which honestly is a great quality in a man. Also, he doesn’t seem like a guy who dumps his clothes on the ground. Very neat man.”

Lila giggled. “Ah yes, he was always like that.” She said. “When we dated, his room was always the neatest, and it really shows a lot about a man-“

The rest of what she said got drowned out by a strange rush running through Helga’s ears.

Arnold and Lila had actually dated before?

It was plausible, of course. It made sense.

Didn’t mean she felt comfortable with that fact though.

“Ha….I didn’t realise you two actually dated.” She said, managing to keep her voice neutral.

“Oh, it really wasn’t as serious at all,” Lila said, waving a hand. “We did date a bit, yes and he was an oh so lovely gentleman, but …I guess I couldn’t see myself being able to cope with the admiration that surrounded him all the time, “. Lila shook her head ruefully. “Which was disappointing, to be sure. I just thought that I could get past that and not be so overwhelmed.”

That was something that Helga wasn’t expecting, and something she let show in her voice. “Really?”

“Yes…”Lila sighed. “As I said, he was lovely, but perhaps…too lovely.”

Helga, who was beginning to feel very confused and a little irritated at Lila’s manner of speech, decided to mask her feelings by raising her mimosa to her lips, preparing to take a large gulp.

“In the end, it was frustrating for me when I realised I could not return that same love and devotion,”Lila continued, taking a moderate sip of her hot tea, and not looking at Helga, who had downed the contents of the mimosa and enjoying every minute of it. “And it did not help that he’s got so many people that love and cherish him so much. I supposed I just felt so very out of place in such a large and loving family.” She gazed at her own cup of tea, looking unusually wistful.

Helga lowered her glass, a little thrown by what Lila had just revealed. “I thought someone like you would have loved the idea of a big, close family.” She said.
Lila laughed in disbelief, “Oh heavens no!” she replied. “It may sound absolutely lovely, but it has always been me and my father growing up, and I didn’t have many relatives that had a hand in my childhood. Arnold’s family was so large and so colourful and eccentric, and to have so many ties…” She shook her head. “I couldn’t do it.”

This was …not what Helga was expecting at all. “I thought you and Arnold were close.” She said flatly. “You two are so friendly, and yesterday at the Cheese Festival, and you two have your inside jokes…”

Lila tilted her head and for the first time her eyes looked directly at Helga’s, and the blonde woman had to gulp. Something about her gaze was making her feel very self-conscious about herself. Then a light seemed to shine in her eyes, and then Lila took a deep breath.

“There is no one, and I mean no one who can ever match up to my first and only love, Thomas.” she said.

Oh right, her husband. Her dead husband. Now she felt really bad about wingmaning for Arnold considering the fact that Lila was still mourning the death of her husband.

“R….right.” Helga muttered.

The silence was near deafening. She really should say something about it.

“So what now?” Arnold asked.

“No idea, my man.” Gerald replied. “Have you considered changing your name, appearance, and moving to an entirely new city, country, galaxy? Cause I think your options are kinda limited here.”

“I…I think I hate you man.”

“So…you met him from the diner?” Helga asked.

Lila sipped her tea. “He was the sweetest man I’d ever met. Sgt Thomas Sawyer Thompkins, and he came in all the time for a full breakfast and a cup of black coffee. He told me about his life, always tipped well, and was in the army about to go to Iraq, he’d served 2 tours there. He’d no parents, no other family, so he always seemed…lonely. I felt bad, so I offered him my address so he could send letters to me when he was away. It was helpful. He didn’t feel as alone in a foreign country and it was nice to receive letters from someone.”

Helga nodded. Sounded like something Lila would do.

“In any case, we fell in love through letters and we got married.” Lila smiled. “We were so young, you know? I was 20, and he was 25, and we had a son, Sawyer.”

Helga continued nodding until she realized something. “Wait. So your husband’s middle name was
“Sawyer.” Lila said. “It was one of the reasons we bonded.”

“And your son’s name is….Sawyer.” Helga said slowly.

Something very similar to mirth sparked up in Lila’s eyes. “Why yes. It felt right. And he has his father’s name for his middle name…”

“And …you double-barrelled your last name…”

“Yes. “Lila supplied, sipping her tea.

“Your son’s name is Sawyer Thomas Sawyer-Thomkins?” Helga asked, in disbelief.

“We thought it was ever so cute when we named him!” Lila chirped.

Helga groaned. “Of course you did.”

Chapter End Notes

This seems like a pretty good stopping point. It would have been way longer if I had my way. However, my impatience got the better of me.

Thanks again to Arrku for helping me out with Lila's speech patterns, I am horrible with the way she speaks.
So.

I’ve been gone for awhile. A lot has happened since the last time I wrote and uploaded a chapter. I resigned from my old job and got a new one. My Boyfriend was rushed to the hospital and it was touch and go for a bit. I went travelling to visit him and attend a wedding. I started my new job. Stress had gotten me down and this story, my very lovely story, got tiring for me to think up of and it was hard trying to complete this. I had to leave it for a bit to work on my other story, a lighthearted one that had more flirting and humour than this behemoth I accidentally created.

This chapter is less funnier than I wish it was but I promise it is part of an arc, and think of this as us entering the end of the second arc and going near the beginning of the final arc.

I will be slower uploading chapters, once a month. But I promise I will do it. All I’m asking for is for you guys to keep reading with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Okay, so let me get this straight, because for some reason I feel like I’ve been missing out on a lot, almost like months.” Helga said.

“Mhmm?”

“You dated and married a man, aka a soldier who enlisted in the Army.”

“Mhmm.”

“You married young, at 20, and you both have a son, Sawyer Thompelstrom Tom Sawyer.”

“Sawyer Thomas Sawyer- Thompkins, actually,” Lila said, taking a sip of of tea.

“Right, that monstrosity of a name-“

“I think it’s ever so sweet. And he’s never forgotten his last name for school.”

“I’ll be honest, I was never worried about that.” Helga said, very drily. “In fact, it never made the Top Ten List.”

She raised the other glass of mimosa to her lips, taking a sip of the drink through the long flute. “So, then, what happened?”

Lila sighed. “The war, unfortunately. He was shipped to Iraq for a period of time…”

“Oh.” Helga said slowly.

Well, that explained some things. Lila as a war widow was something she didn’t realise would come
as a shock until it did. She should have known, of course, what with him in the army and all.

“He did so well, though.” Lila said, “He saved his unit from an attack, and was awarded a Purple Heart out of it…” She smiled, though Helga could see the glimmers of sadness in her eyes. “I was so proud of him, we got to see him get the award and everything.”

Helga felt something that she could honestly say she had never felt for Lila before. Was it pure, unadulterated sympathy? Admiration for her strength against adversity? A combination of both? Really, it was something she’d never felt with relation to Lila Sawyer before.

“Wow.” Fuck, she’d never felt so …un-eloquent before. That was a word right? To cover up the fact that she was about to make her debut as an Owen Wilson impersonator, she quickly followed that up with, “He sounds amazing, Lila.”

Lila looked up and it was clear that she was softly smiling, despite the abject sadness in her eyes. “That’s really rather sweet of you to say, Helga.”

The both of them looked down at their drinks, both pretty sure that the other was blinking back tears rapidly. It took a few seconds for Helga to slowly try and steer them back to the topic.

“You’re brave, you know, Lila.” She began, feeling very self-conscious. This woman was the same age as her and yet she had braved poverty, childbirth, a spouse being in the war and his subsequent death, as well as raising a child on her own while starting her own business. If Helga were not feeling bouts of shame for her thinking horrible thoughts about Lila, she would be unabashedly declaring that Lila Sawyer-Thompkins was one of her heroes. “I couldn’t dream of imagining having a husband die while in service to the military…”

“Oh, he didn’t die when he was in active service, Helga.” Lila said, smiling serenely. “He was about to come home, and he and his mates had a layover at an airport, so they decided to stop over at London for a few days…they were having fun at the carnival when one of his mates dared him to eat ten hot dogs at one go.”

Lila looked at Helga, and the blonde was surprised to see her, still smiling. “That was my Thomas, always eating so quickly like there was no tomorrow.”

Helga, who was now on her third mimosa, was struggling to make sure she got what Lila was saying properly. “So…you’re saying that Thomas, your husband, and a man in the military who risked his lives for his platoon…died while choking on a hot dog?”

Lila nodded, eyes watery but still smiling. “The man was always eating so quickly during mealtimes, and I was just happy that he had such a good appetite. Even back when he was in the diner—“

Helga was not listening. “He didn’t die in service?!” she said, feeling every bit of the ludicrousness of the situation. Fuck, was this fiction? Is that what was happening right now? “I mean—“

“Oh, I understand your reaction, Helga.” Lila said, still serene. “When I first found out, I too was overwhelmed with the feelings, the lack of reason, not understanding how something like this could ever happen…death just seemed so senseless—“

“I have reactions, alright.” Helga muttered, deciding that downing another glass of mimosa would be appropriate in this situation. The alcohol was giving her a fun buzz, which may actually shield her from the apparent madness that was taking place in front of her.
“Why aren’t you more upset about this anyway?” She asked. “Shouldn’t you be all mourning widow at the top of a lighthouse seeking the horizons out for your lost love or something?”

Lila was so quiet that Helga was about to backpedal and apologize, feeling that she had finally gone way too far on something Lila-related, when Lila finally said, “I did, at first.” The redhead was still smiling, but mournfully now. “When it first happened, when I heard the news, I spent weeks crying at night, unable to figure out how to move on.”

She stirred her tea using a straw, sighing. “It’s a bit hard, thinking back on it, especially when I had a 5 year old son to think about. I tried to be strong for him, pushed down on the feelings of anger and sadness. And it worked, for a short period of time.”

Confused, Helga asked, “What do you mean?”

Lila looked up from her drink stirring. “When I was young…I was ever-so relentlessly cheerful because I wanted to be strong for daddy, especially since he was so broken up when Mom died. We had no one to rely on, we were ever so poor…Looking back, I’m surprised I didn’t drive all of my friends mad with my attitude, I must have been a right-old fright!” She took a sip of her tea, laughing a little.

“Uh….huh….” Helga said slowly. She did remember what Lila was taking about, vaguely, but now, when absorbing the facts as an adult, it had finally sunk in, the full monty of everything Lila had went through. “And you tried to do the same for your kid, being all cheerful and strong and shit?”

“Yeah, it didn’t work after awhile.” Lila replied, ruefully. “After the first year, the lowest point was when Sawyer got sent home from school, after biting another boy in his year when fighting. When I tried to explain to him that fighting was bad and talking about your feelings was the way to go, he yelled back at me and told me I was doing the same thing.” Lila sighed again, her eyes looking ten years older than earlier, and then laughed. “It’s ever-so ironic when your child accuses you of the same thing you’re doing.”

Helga, who had just received the news that her old school-chum was probably raising a cannibal, mentally decided that perhaps ordering red meat today would not be a good idea.

“In any case, though. I have to thank you.” Lila said, looking up at her. “This was part of the reason why I asked you out today.”

“Grzlp?” offered Helga as she had at that moment started eating fries with abandon, trying to get the image of a flesh-eating child out of her head.

“It was tough, trying to handle Sawyer on my own for the first three years after Thomas died.” Lila admitted. “He was sullen, angry, moody. Never talked to me unless he needed something. Constantly talked back to me. It was like this for ages. I thought that we were never going to be able to be close again, and that nearly killed me, he was the only thing of Thomas I had left. Then one day he started reading your books. Got it out of the library, during a reading session with his teacher.”

“Say what now?” Helga said eloquently.

“I don’t know what to tell you, but he loved reading your books so much, I just had to read one for
myself.” Lila said, looking at Helga with shining eyes. “The issues the kids go through in those Our Gang books…you have a gift, Helga!”

Helga, who did not expect this level of praise being heaped on her, decided to choke on her mimosa.

“I- *COUGH* what?!” she spluttered.

“Oh, Helga.” There was that voice Lila had, the voice that sometimes reminded her of Olga (stop thinking about her, stop stop stop). “You were always an inspiration to me, especially during horrible times. I really hope that you understand that, how much you and your books have helped me and my boy, especially in the last few years. I know that we have never been the best of friends.”

Helga, who had managed to recover from her recent coughing spree, only offered a small croak in reply to Lila’s confession.

“But I need you to know this.” Lila locked eyes from across the table, and making sure Helga did the same, she said, “I want you to know that even if we are never good friends, I am glad that I know you. I am glad you are here because you helped my son when he was angry, and him doing so encouraged me to do the same thing and it’s because of you that I am the person I am today. And for that, Helga Pataki, I am ever so grateful, and I am thankful that you are in my life.”

The blonde woman at this point didn’t offer any more sounds or discernable words, staring at Lila with widened blue eyes, in shock.

“Did…someone bribe you or something to tell me this?” was what she finally managed to muster.

“Oh, Helga.” Lila said, beaming. “You have to believe me when I say that you are truly amazing.”

The both of them sat across each other, in an awkward, long silence.

“Out of curiosity.” Helga said, deciding that it made sense for her to break the tension. “How did you…you know. Move on? From the past?”

Lila looked pensive, the earlier brightness of her eyes dimming down by just a bit, “I’ll be very honest.” Lila said slowly. “Ultimately, I’m not super sure if I will ever get out of it. Mourning Thomas…Helga, you have to understand, this was the only person I have ever gotten close to, besides my son, and ultimately this means that I might not be able to do so for any other person, friend, family or lover. It’s ever so lonely, and so tiring.”

That sounded…pretty horrible. “So what are you doing right now?”

“Why, making sure that I keep trying, of course.” Lila said simply. “While I recognize that Thomas was the love of my life, and the only person I ever trusted, I also have to remember that I have to stay connected to everyone else in my life, and I have to keep trying no matter what.” Lila took a sip of her tea, letting Helga mull over what she said.

“How does that…help you move on?” Helga said, confused.

“Why, don’t you know this, Helga?” Lila laughed a little. “Relationships are what ties us. In order to move on, we have to make sure we keep trying, we keep moving, and we meet people that will
teach us new things, new perspectives. And then when you add that to time… That fades the scars, a little, a lot. And then one day you wake up and you realised that what you’re feeling back then? It’s gone.” Lila shook her head ruefully. “I’m not there yet, and I worry I might never be. But that’s not going to stop me from trying.”

Helga had no time to react to what Lila had said before her phone started ringing, and the screen flashed a name that she recognized. Quickly, Helga apologized to Lila before she accepted the call, and what she heard next left her reeling.

An hour later saw Helga and Lila walking out of a fancy mall’s security offices, with a very grumpy blonde child in tow.

“ It was ever so lovely of you to let us off like this, Mr Poole!” Lila called out as she turned back to look at the Head of Security of Hillwood Mall.

“Well, if it’s a friend of yours, Mrs Sawyer-Thompson, it’s all good.” The security guard, who was a few minutes ago stern and foreboding, was now waving back at Lila cheerfully. “I suggest you keep an eye on troublemakers like her, ma’am.” he addressed a quietly furious Helga. “We’re letting her off without a record on account of her age and Mrs Sawyer-Thompson here, she’s the reason why my daughter has a whole new life and everything-“

“Suck up.” Muttered a sullen Ophelia Pataki-Johnson.

“Hey!” Helga growled. “Don’t you start, missy. You’re lucky I’m not your mother-“

“Please, you’re PRACTICALLY my mother, except you know….absent!” Phi growled back.

Helga, who never really outgrew her old insecure self, was about to retort when Lila placed a hand on her shoulder and the woman realised that she was a 30-year-old woman about to argue with a ten-year-old child.

She pushed down the anger, taking deep breaths.

Get it together, Pataki. Small child here, be a role model, children are the future, teach them well and let them lead the way-

“ Well, I should get going.” Lila said, her eyes full of concern as she turned to look at the two blondes. “I don’t want to bother during a family crisis and all-“

“Lila-“ Helga began, then closed her mouth, having no idea exactly how to express her thanks to the redhead woman for helping her bail Phi out with no consequences. “I don’t- I.”

“ Helga, “ Lila smiled gently. “It’s okay. We’ll have lunch again soon, I hope?”

Helga nodded dumbly.

“ It was good meeting you, Ophelia.” Lila turned to look at the younger blonde, but received no reaction other than a sullen scowl, bottom lip jutting out.
Somehow though that seemed to make Lila smile wider. “So alike at that age.” Lila chuckled and left.

That left Helga alone with her niece, and in all honesty Helga had no idea how to proceed from that point.

WWVBD?

What Would Vivian Bliss Do?

Helga closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and loosened her shoulders, then turned to look at Phi.

“Pancakes?” Helga asked.

There they were, back at the diner where she and Ophelia had lunch a few days ago, and so far neither one of them had said a word beyond confirming their food orders.

Phi was leaning back against the cushion of the booth, arms folded and sullen. Helga was sitting up, quietly looking down at the menu, even though the both of them had already made their orders.

The tension was growing thicker, Helga felt like she was suffocating.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Helga began, not looking at Phi.

The girl didn’t reply, still looking sullen.

Helga audibly sighed. “Look, I’m really glad you called me-“

“Let’s get this straight, lady.” Phi snapped. “I only called you cause you’re the only person I know who won’t rat me out to the rents, and who’s willing to suck up to me just because I know you’re desperate for children and some sort of family-“

Helga felt something snap inside. Maybe it was the mimosas taking effect. She thought the experience of picking Phi up from mall security for shoplifting had sobered her up but nope.

Fuck WWVBD, it was time for WWHPD.

“Alright, that’s it missy,” Helga retorted. “You’re lucky I like you, cause I am spilling the hot t all over your lap right now, and no shade, henny, but you should be THANKFUL you’re dealing with me instead of your mother right now-“

What followed next was a long, lengthy diatribe about the fact that ultimately, the fact that Ophelia called a woman who she had only met twice before to bail her out of a potential police situation was testament to how they were fucking bonded, fuck you very much, and technically she could have jolly well left Ophelia in that place and called her mom instead but Ophelia needed was a calm cool head that would be able to resolve the situation. At some point Helga was dimly aware that she had more or less lost the plot or the thread of the situation but that was not the point, the important bit was trying to get across to Phi that she was trying, she was on her side, and she had to stop being an entitled selfish child who pushed people away like a scorpion who was on the back of a frog that was swimming it across the lake.

When that was finished, and the red crimson wave of what Helga had felt lifted, she was very aware that Ophelia’s mouth was gaping and she was openly staring at her.
Okay, she felt super guilty. That was clearly not the way to handle kids. Fuck this entire situation. She was pretty sure swearing at a child was not a good idea.

“I’m sorry.” She replied, quietly. “I am very frustrated over the situation and the swearing was uncalled for. This-“

“It’s okay.” Phi replied, just as quietly. “I needed someone to call me out-“

“A nine year old should not be called out by an adult who thinks she knows better.” Helga said ruefully. “I’m near 30, ancient by your standards, I should-and I do-know better than that. I shouldn’t be cussing you out like you were a drag performer in a bar.”

“What’s drag?” Phi asked.

“...okay I’ll explain that bit later, but I’m trying to say something here.” She grabbed Phi’s hand that was on the table, grasping it in a gentle but firm grip.

“I like you. And I like to think that we’re friends. So we’re related by blood, and I’m actually your mom’s Sister. So what? I don’t even consider her my Sister anymore, and I don’t have any authority over you, other than the fact that we’re related. However,” and here she made sure she looked at Phi in the eye. “Shoplifting? Leads to a road of extremely stupidity that frankly, with you and your smarts? You can do without- why did you do it anyway?”

She made sure to keep her voice a little lighter so that she didn’t come across as judgy adult but as a curious, non-judgy friend.

Phi didn’t answer, which was honestly something Helga expected.

“ You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.” Helga said, just as calmly, patting her hands and letting go, so that she could nonchalantly wave her hand to show how Phi didn’t actually have to answer if she didn’t want to. “I’m just saying... when I was older than you? I did a whole bunch of things I’m honestly not proud of, and if I didn’t have someone that was able to talk everything out and help me? I would have gone spare.”

That got the girl’s curiosity. “ Like what?” She asked.

Helga leaned back, stretching comfortably. “ Well, I beat up a few guys, broke a couple of faces, shoplifted a few times, but I was hungry that one time, so it was easy to justify that... got arrested a few times-“

“You got arrested?” Phi breathed, and it was clear that reluctant as she was, she wanted to know more about Helga’s experiences. “What for?”

“It was nothing.” Helga waved a hand again. Did it make sense to explain to a nine year old who was raised by a very conservative family the issues of politics and social matters, considering the fact that Helga might not ever see her again? “It’s just ...work you know.”

“You have a job that gets you arrested?” Phi asked, looking perplexed. “Aren’t you some sort of pamby book writer?”

That gave Helga pause. “I didn’t tell you I was an author.” She said slowly. “How did you-“

“I googled, duh.” Phi replied. Then she flushed. “I don’t like you or anything, but you lied to me, mom wouldn’t tell me who you were beyond you being her sister -“
Helga would have originally let the matter rest but her traitorous brain made her blurt out, “How’s your mom?”

She wanted to slap her forehead. Or wedgie it. Or punch herself in the face like she used to do for the bullies in the neighbourhood that didn’t bow down to Queen Pataki. Why on earth did she want to know what was happening with Olga?

But before she could answer her, Phi replied,” Mom’s crying a lot more. It’s strange.”

That... was weird. Helga was not surprised that Olga was resorting to crying again, but the fact that Ophelia found a crying Olga strange defied her own understanding of logic. “In what way?” She asked carefully, trying her best to suppress her own surprise.

“She cries a lot now.” Phi said simply. “She never used to cry much. Dad doesn’t know.”

Helga pondered over this slowly, feeling stupefied. “Oh.” This was way different from the Olga of her youth and the Olga of a few days ago during their confrontation, when she cried at the drop of a hat.

“Odie and Orlando don’t know too.” Phi said, looking uncomfortable. “I only know cause I walked in on her doing it a few times. She told me not to tell anyone else.”

She looked at Helga suspiciously, “If you’re my aunt, why have I never seen you before?” She asked bluntly.

Helga didn’t know how to reply this but she knew Phi wanted her to be straight with her, so she told her a half-truth.

“I did something that your Mother and your pop-pop didn’t approve of, and I haven’t spoken to either of them for years.” she said.

Phi nodded, seemingly accepting of this answer. “Pop-pop gets angry a lot.” She replied.

Helga agreed, silently. She had been on the receiving end of Big Bob’s rage, whether cold and icy or hot and blustery. She knew what Phi meant.

The both of them mulled over what was said for a short while before Phi grudgingly offered an explanation.

“I just wanted to see if I could do it.”

That was something Helga was not expecting.

“Okay, can you tell me what you mean by that?” She said slowly.

“Well, Freddie was a total shitshow.”

“Language.” Helga said automatically. It was weird censoring someone for bad language of all things, and Helga, sweary, F-Bomb using Helga, was very well-aware of that.

“I just feel stupid, you know? And then I thought I was smart enough to trust you but then you lied to me, so I stole something.”

Helga was feeling that she might have missed something crucial along the way cause there was a jump somewhere.
“You lost me there, Phi.” She said, as honestly as she could.

“I feel stupid cause my plan didn’t work. Then I didn’t realise you were lying, which made me feel even stupider. So I thought that if I could pull off something that no one else knew about I would be smart.” Phi explained, looking frustrated. “But I got caught. So I really must be stupid.”

Helga was torn. So so torn. On the one hand she thought that this logical thought process was one of the funniest things she had heard off, and wanted so badly to laugh. On the other hand, the dejected face on Ophelia Pataki - Johnson threw her back to the time when she took a standardised test and felt so stupid in comparison to the supposed genius Harold Bergman that she started wearing plaid and wanted to run away to a cabin in the woods.

She could remember feeling humiliated, one disaster after another, and doing big grand gestures to try and compensate for her messes, only to fall further away from her earlier perfect plans, and frustrated because no one understood how much she felt and yet how much was shown lacked the power she wanted to wield on the world. At nine she felt she was perfectly tipped to take on the world and then so upset, angry and frustrated, helpless when she was unable to resolve her problems.

At that age, she thought she was so so smart and yet she was also so so naive, and unable to adequately understand why things happened the way it did.

She saw herself in Ophelia. And if what Ophelia said earlier was right, Ophelia and her had something else in common back when she was nine. They both didn’t have a good support system that helped talk them out and explain why they felt the way they did.

Helga had managed to dig herself out of that rut, but that then took loads of time, effort, anger, tears, and therapy. It was something that led to a lot of emotional issues for years, years that couldn’t be taken back.

She didn’t want Ophelia to have to face the same thing all by herself.

The next few steps of what she had to do had to be done carefully. She knew what it was like for adults to laugh at her and tell her off for being a silly, thoughtless girl, and it made her angry for a long, long time.

“Phi.” She said, quietly. “Listen to me.”

Ophelia looked at her, at once suspicious, trusting, aloof and yet eager.

“Proving how smart you are by shoplifting is ...not a good idea.” Helga attested. “It’s impulsive, it’s fuelled by emotions that can cause mistakes. As someone who has always done the opposite of what someone has told me in order to prove them wrong, I have learnt a few things. “

She sighed. “You’ll feel a small jolt of happiness that you’ve proved someone wrong, but that thing, that feeling, it doesn’t last. You’ll start feeling strange, empty, feeling like the first time was a fluke, so you repeat it again, and again. You have the satisfaction of knowing that you did something everyone thought you weren’t able to do and then you try and do it again so that when you eventually get caught, and that’s what you really want to do,” she added knowingly, because she had been down that road, “When you look at them and tell them smugly that you have been doing it for way longer than expected, and they had no idea because of how dumb they were and how smart you really are... sooner or later what you really want to do is to prove them wrong. And escalate it, just to show that this time was more outrageous than the last. And how much smarter you really are. But that won’t make them proud of you. That makes them scared of you. And it’s lonely. “
Phi folded her arms, and Helga knew she had gotten to her a little, but was trying to cover it up.

Scowling, the girl retorted, "Hey, it’s lonely when you’re at the top. It’s meant to be. Survival is only for the fittest—"

"And that’s capitalism at its finest." Helga said, laughingly. "I’ve been on the receiving end of that speech from Big Bob himself. But Phi. People live for a very long time, even if they aren’t at the top."

A flash of Lila’s face thanking her for being in her life earlier that day popped into her head, and so did Arnold’s face, from all those months ago in that bar after the book signing, when she thanked him for shaping her moral compass.

"And they’ll never forget what you did or didn’t do for them.” She continued. "And they’ll repay you back in kind, whether you did them good or not. No amount of cleverness can shield you from pain or joy, and shitty behaviour isn’t always forgiven.” She gazed out the booth, at the door that led to Hillwood, the origin of her folly.

Phi was quiet. Both of them didn’t say anything for awhile.

Helga took a deep breath.

An hour and a half ago, she had dropped Ophelia off at the street nearby her house, after the girl had promised that she would go straight home and thanking Helga for not ratting her out to her mom. The little blonde girl had then paused, and ran to hug Helga, before turning around and running out of sight. Helga then turned around and walked away, at a nearby cafe.

She had stared at her phone for awhile, at a handle on her Twitter DMs. She picked up the phone, typed in a few lines, then placed it down. Then she took out her earphones and she closed Twitter, opening up a YouTube video. She watched the video without much interest. She was here for a much bigger purpose and the next step had to show itself before she could proceed.

She had waited for a shorter time than expected.

A blonde figure had entered the cafe and spotted Helga immediately. Quietly, she walked towards Helga’s table, and stood in front of her.

Helga barely looked up from her phone because she knew who the newcomer was.

"We need to talk.” She addressed the figure, still not looking at her. She gestured at the chair across from her and the figure hesitated for only a second before she followed Helga’s direction.

Once seated, Olga Pataki- Johnson looked at her younger sister. Helga could practically feel the aura of guilt and regret radiating off her and she rolled her eyes. She was not going to let emotions get in the way of what she was about to do.

She had decided not to look at Olga in the face. She had caught a glimpse of Olga’s face when rolling her eyes and was suddenly struck by how similar she was to Miriam. Their eyes drooped and her shoulders were defeated. The skin under the eyes were shadowed, sunken.

Olga had always resembled their Mother, and right here, the older woman a shadow of her self, Helga could see how the two of them were near identical, the past replicated in the present.

She didn’t need those sort of thoughts in her head about her Mother at the moment. She needed to
keep calm and cool, to do this on her own terms.

“We have unfinished business, you and I.” She continued, steeling her voice with cold arrogance, the one that helped her deal with things in a business-like manner. It was something that she had, unfortunately in this case, learnt at the feet of their Father when doing business. “And I want you to understand what I want to do, and we have to do this. You will not say anything for now until I state what I want, but ultimately I want this to work. “

She stopped for a few seconds to let this sink in before she continued. “Before I go on: Do you agree to this?”

The silence was deafening as Helga waited for Olga to respond.

Chapter End Notes

Please review and kudos it if you like this chapter, I want to hear your views!
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Long, arduous, and then suddenly during a bout of depression, I wrote the majority of this.

So...this episode was brought to you be anxiety and triggers!

CW: There's a pretty dark scene that does contemplate suicide. Do take note.

Arnold did not see Helga Pataki until very very late that night.

This was pretty worrying for someone like Arnold, who wondered if his awkward interaction with Helga was the reason why she was currently not back yet.

“Dude, she’s a grown-assed woman,” groaned Gerald Johansson, still in Washington, far away from his best friend but still somehow willing to help him with his life choices. “Maybe she and Lila are hitting the clubs. Maybe they’re becoming good friends. Maybe Helga murdered Lila and is currently burying her corpse in the river, I don’t know. You can’t worry about stuff like that, you’re not her dad.”

“I can get worried, can’t I?” Arnold grumbled, listlessly poking at an open can of tuna that he had opened up with the intent of eating the contents straight from the can. Maybe he and Gerald should learn how to cook more, the bachelor lifestyle was not helpful for someone turning 30 this year. “They could be lost. Maybe -“

“You’re working on a lot of maybes, bro.” Gerald pointed out, lying back on clean white sheets. Evidentially he was still in his hotel room. “Maybe Lila and her are shopping together. Maybe Lila’s taking her on a cheese tour. Maybe you’re worrying too much. She’s not going to run out on you just because you’re a white guy who’s so flakey on your confessions you might as well be a tiger mascot because you represent frosted flakes.”

Arnold batted the shade away -that word was something he learned from both Gerald and Helga- “Come on man, I need you. You’re my sounding board-“

“Arnold, my sweet summer child. Listen up.” Gerald ordered. “You are my brother, my friend,
secret-keeper, fellow failed Musician, so I owe it to you to be honest. This problem you have? Easily solved. Tell her how you feel!”

“But I...”

“My dude, I told you this earlier, and I’m going to repeat this again.” Gerald said, rubbing a hand over his face. “Decide whether you want to tell her or not, and then stick with it. You can’t just sit on the fence and just twiddle your fingers. That’s not fair to you, or her. “

“But...”

“Dude, you gotta stop calling me and asking if you should do this or that when the answer isn’t gonna change!” Gerald groaned. “We spend way too much time together as it is! We’ve never gone a day without talking to each other, even when we’re in different towns! This is why people think we’re in a committed relationship!”

“Would it be so bad being in a relationship with me?” Arnold grumbled testily.

“Nah, it would be kinda cool actually.” Gerald said, a small grin erupting on his face. “You like taking care of people, and I think you would treat me right. Hell, we would go on so many cheese tours together-“

The idea of taking Gerald on a cheese tour did not appeal to Arnold, but that was mostly because Arnold would rather be taking Helga instead. Well, technically they had already been on a sorta cheese tour anyway, but that was not the point. “Thanks but nah.” He said drily.

Gerald’s loud, fake gasp was drawn out and very very fake. “ You wouldn’t even take ME out for cheese?” He said dramatically. “The romance is over between us, Shortman! Over!”

“You’ll be very demanding in a relationship, Johansson.” Arnold replied calmly. “We already live together and you have expensive tastes. I can’t afford that sorta heartache. “

“You and I already live under the same roof and you can’t even make an honest man out of me?” Gerald cried. “My momma warned me about men like you!”
Arnold was about to retort with a snappy reply of his own when his phone buzzed with a message from Helga.

_You there? I can’t get in, forgot keys._

Aloud, he said, “Big G, I gotta go,” as he tapped out a message to reply Helga. They said their goodbyes, and Arnold turned to open the door just as Helga made her ascent up the stairs.

He opened his mouth to greet her and was struck by how upset she looked. Her eyes were red and raw, evidently she had rubbed some makeup away, there were still patchy remnants on her face. Her face looked pale and gaunt, and her hair was mussed up, currently in a top knot to get it away from her face. She must have remembered how she currently looked, because she had quickly looked away while removing the hair tie from her hair, smoothening the blonde and fading pink strands with her fingers. Fingers that didn’t look super steady.

“I... I should have called.” Helga muttered, sounding tired and defeated as she brushed past him to get into the apartment. “I’m so sorry, Shortman-“

“Hey hey, it’s okay.” Arnold soothed, trying to access the situation. She looked sober, thought very very tired and shaken. She had reached the sofa and proceeded to collapse on top of it. She had been crying, that much could be seen, but why? Did Lila make her cry? That didn’t seem right, but it could have happened. No that was silly talk. Nothing could have made Helga Pataki sad-

Pataki. Family. Fuck, something family related.

What on earth could have happened?

His face must have given something away because Helga turned around, took one look at his face and smiled wearily. That did not ease any of his worries. But hey Helga was smiling. Somewhat. Things couldn’t have been that bad right?

“I’ll explain everything, but I think after the very long day I’ve had, I need a drink.” She said. “Got anything strong?”
In the bachelor pad that Gerald and Arnold shared, there was not much alcohol.

This was, to be honest, rather surprising, especially since Gerald and Arnold had made no bones about the fact that they did partake in drinking. However, it also made some sort of sense. Gerald and Arnold, besides the 6 pack of beer they usually brought in their groceries, didn’t seek out alcoholic drinks because they were just too busy in their daily lives, so it didn’t make sense to have any.

“We have red wine and white.” Arnold said, carrying the two glass bottles to the living room, where Helga was sitting, tense, on the couch. He was aware that he was babbling, but filling up the silence was better than the alternative, which was more silence. His brain really wasn’t working too well, and he decided that perhaps rambling might get Helga to say something. He took out a corkscrew and twisted it so the spiral metal bit unfurled, poking out of its original position. “Rhonda brought this fancy bottle for our housewarming party a few years ago that we didn’t know what to do with, so we stashed it in the fridge. And then she bought more wine for New Year’s a while ago and left it with us so now we have ...Pinot Noir and something foreign something.”

Nothing. No reaction.

He uncorked both bottles, pouring out the contents of both into two mugs. The bachelor lifestyle had never prepared the boys for any sort of glass stemware. It was sorta the reason why the wine was never drunk, Rhonda had flipped out when she had found out that they hadn’t had proper wine glasses, and threw a corkscrew at Gerald’s head (thankfully he had ducked, Rhonda had a pretty mean aim, and the corkscrew nearly hit him in the eye.)

Helga still hadn’t said anything at this point, but she had taken the Mug that contained red wine, downed the liquid like one would with a shot, and grimaced. “That was not a good idea.” She croaked. But he could see the ghost of a grin on her lips. That was a little reassuring. She made a gesture for Arnold to refill her glass and he proceeded to do so, letting the red liquid slosh around the ceramic mug. He could almost hear the scream of Rhonda in his ear for treating Pinot Noir in such a bad fashion, but that was not the time.

“You’ll get sick that way,” he chided. “Don’t drink it so quickly.”

Helga sighed. “God I hate wine sometimes. But it goes well with cheese. And cheese is still good.” She let herself collapse against the back of the cushy sofa, clasping the mug tightly in her hands.

“I think I made a pact with the devil. “Helga murmured.
That set off a load of warning bells, for a lot of reasons. The first thing Arnold made sure to do was to check Helga for any obvious injuries or bloodstains. She looked okay, no cuts anywhere on her body-

“It wasn’t literal, you goose.” Helga laughed, “Stop checking me out like a library book, I’m not your patient.”

“Sorry.” Arnold said, but he still gave her a look over. Just in case. “What devil? Also how did you go from meeting Lila to the devil?”

Helga sighed, and told him how she had went to meet Lila, received a phone call, and then bailed Phi out of mall jail. Arnold absorbed the information, quietly.

“Well, that’s a lot to take in.” Arnold murmured, taking a small sip of the wine mug. “But what does this have to do with the devil?”

Helga took a swig of her own wine mug, and made a face. She clearly wasn’t a fan of the wine. “I called Olga to meet me at the cafe.”

That...didn’t make sense. “Why?” He asked.

Helga sighed. “A proposition.”

“I will be keeping the house.”

*Olga blinked and was about to say something when Helga cut her off. “We had a deal, now shut up and listen.”*

*Olga paused, and then she did what Helga actually said, which bolstered Helga’s confidence so that she could charge on.*

“I have already called my lawyer, and he’s doing up the paperwork that will be sent over to you and
your own Lawyers tonight. If it goes well, and you sign it tomorrow morning, the house will be transferred to my name by the original date mentioned in your own paperwork. As such, I want you to promise me that you will, as you originally promised, not have any say in what I will be doing with the house.” She was pretty sure she was rambling, but she wanted to make a point. “The house will be mine to do as I choose. If I choose to sell it, that will be my decision. If I choose to demolish it, it will still be my decision. If I plan to renovate the house and turn it into a haunted house dedicated to worship the fucking Mother Vinegar Strain, you will not question my decision. Are we clear?”

Olga hesitated, and then nodded.

“Good. Now, we both know that you wanted me to take the house, out of some weird assed understanding that I will come home to Hillwood, and so you can start some sort of sequel to Full House where we get canned laughter and we can all hug out all our problems or something.” Helga stated flatly. “You will not be the hero in this story. You will not get to erase the shit you and Bob put me through, and fuck your nostalgia filter. In the best of circumstances, I would not even want to be near either of you.

“However,” and here her voice softened. “I am not an island, and neither are you. And like it or not, legal terms dictate that your family and I are related and one day they might have to know who I am, especially if Bob dies. I’ve met two of your in-laws, and your daughter. If you want me here in Hillwood, and if you genuinely want me to be a part of the family again, it will be on my terms.”

She paused to gauge Olga’s reaction. And Helga was dismayed to find that Olga was actually smiling, a mixture of tearful relief and exuberant love gleaming from her eyes. Fuck it to hell, Olga was happy about this? What game was she playing at?

And it didn’t help that whatever it was, it seemed genuine. Clearly Olga was becoming more senile in her old age.

“I want you and I to go to therapy,” Helga said, now a bit more hesitant due to Olga’s weird reaction. “I don’t want to talk to Big Bob. The man drives me crazy. “

Olga was still. Fucking. Smiling. Now Helga, who was frankly getting more unsettled by her sister’s reaction, started to wonder if she had accidentally started speaking in French.

“I want to start a cult.” She said slowly, just to gauge what her sister would do next. “We will worship Chadwick Boseman and Michael B Jordan’s abs.”
She was pretty sure Olga looked a little confused there and her smile faltered a little, but she still maintained the smile and that’s when Helga’s patience, which always ran a little thinner than most people’s, snapped.

“Awright who the hell replaced your brain with cow eyes and glue?” She demanded. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Olga tilted her head. “Am I allowed to talk now?” She asked politely, a small smile playing on her lips.

Well, Helga had forgotten all about her earlier request for Olga to shut up and listen. Fighting the urge to slap herself, Helga made a stiff nod towards Olga, a motion for her to go ahead.

Olga took a deep breath and smiled. “Yes.”

Fearing that she would probably lose her control if she moved too much, Helga merely raised an eyebrow, questioningly.

Olga took a sip of her tea. “When you left... I realised that what I said was the most honest I have ever been about my unhappy thoughts, and I thought it was wrong about how you never seem to have any happy ones, and it made me think about how much we have lost along the way. Baby sis-Helga,” she corrected herself when she noticed that Helga’s jaw had clenched harder at the term of endearment. “I want to know where I went wrong, and I want you and I to talk. Really talk. That was the first time I was ever open about my emotions since ... well ever. And I want you to do the same, and tell me about your own thoughts. At least with someone who can call me out when I’ve done wrong,” she shook her head ruefully. “I think mommy would want that.” She said. “I think she would want us to at least try.”

Helga was silent, and the both of them sat there for a while, letting the weight of their decision sink in.

“You know I won’t be forced into talking to Big Bob right?” Helga said slowly. “I don’t care about ickle daddykins thinking I’m some degenerate-“

“Oh of course not.” Olga’s eyes widened and she shook her head emphatically. “Daddy is a lovely man but he can be so cruel.”
Helga paused, brushing the thought of Big Bob Pataki out of her head. Then she narrowed her eyes. “Let’s get one more thing clear, Olga,” She sneered, and fuck she was pronouncing Olga’s name the same way she did when she was nine, come on keep it together. “I’m bisexual. And I will be kissing girls and guys if I am attracted to them.” She knew she was near the beginning of a whole new rant but fuck that, she wanted to make sure Olga knew. “If you make one intentionally homophobic remark towards me or anyone-“

“I understand, baby- Helga.” Olga had to stop herself from using the familiar term again, and Helga could at least appreciate her for that, she was trying to treat her as an equal. “I will do better.”

“Good.” Helga replied curtly.

Another fall of awkward silence. And Helga stood up, making sure her arms were steady, holding her up.

“You and I will be seeing more of each other, Olga.” Helga pushed out. “And if you mean every word of what you told me earlier, and what you said today...” the younger blonde woman sighed before she turned around to leave, her back facing Olga. “I think you and I will and can make this work. We’ll be polite, at the very least. You should also go easy on Ophelia. She really loves you, you know.”

She couldn’t see her but she could clearly hear a small gust of breath emit from the person behind her, quiet enough that anyone could almost miss it. “You...really think so?” Olga asked and Helga had to give it to her, both Ophelia and Olga clearly loved each other a lot. Something that she didn’t actually have with Olga but it was proof that Olga was capable of loving someone similar to her, so this thing she was doing could work.

“Yeah.” She said, clenching her fists. “I think you and her should talk more too. Before it’s too late.”

At least one of them had a loving Mother-Daughter relationship. At the point Helga didn’t know if she meant Olga with her own daughter or Olga with their Mother. Either way, it was still true.

And Helga? She had a house. And she was still alone.
“So yeah, “ Helga finished, lamely, and conscious that she seemed to be telling Arnold long distressing stories about her life that ended rather sadly. “That happened.”

Arnold looked a little thrown, entirely possible. He looked really cute with his brow furrowed like that but at this point she was too tired to appreciate it.

“So,” he began, slowly working it out, “If you left earlier, why are you only back now?”

Helga had practice earlier breaking the news to Eugene, Phoebe, and then Patty. Phoebe and Patty were solemn, but Eugene was taking it the hardest. She let what she was about to say casually, as though she was about to order a salad instead.

“I’m coming back.” She said. “To Hillwood.” She stopped herself, and tried again. “I’m coming back to Hillwood.”

Arnold’s eyes widened, and he sucked in a breath.

She knew she was 21 in this dream. She remembered because that was the time when she felt so stretched out, taffy candy consciousness matching chewed up bubblegum like body.

This was how it often ended, alone, tired and exhausted after a late night gig as an emcee. It wasn’t as though she could give up the late night gay bar emcee job because it meant she had to find another source of income that had free dinners, and she was counting on that saved money. But she always felt hungry, and she felt hungry in the dream.

Freelance gigs came only when they could and at this time of the year, with its pitch black void and bone chilling cold? Companies closed because everyone was on holidays, and no one wanted to even think about the notion of work until January 2nd.

She had wished she had Eugene with her but the man was away, with his family for the holidays. It had been rare for Eugene to make it back home for holiday dinners. His parents tended to travel to Florida for the winter, and Eugene didn’t usually have enough for a plane ticket back home as he funneled the cash for rent, his costumes and wigs, but when he could he always went back, and was welcomed with open arms. The Horowitzes loved their baby Eugene with all their heart, even when he had finally come out to them when he was in high school, and Eugene loved them back just as dearly, so Helga never wanted to infringe on their time together. Cold never worked too well in the warm, and at this point, her cold bones and aching body wouldn’t work well in the warmth that was
Eugene’s family. Eugene often asked her to go along with him, but just as often, she refused, always citing work as an excuse. He left it at that, but she knew he wasn’t fooled.

That was okay.

Everything was okay.

In her dream she swept the bare room that she lived in, in an apartment she shared with Eugene. It was bare bones, dry dusty, cold, apart from the room Eugene stored his costumes and wigs in. Helga had her laptop, a crappy phone she had reconnected the day before, and some worn out clothes. She was aware some of her clothes had holes, she did work with some of the cattiest drag queens and queer people in Miltown, but she hadn’t had time to mend them. Alyssa had offered her a spot at her dining table for Christmas but she demurred because Alyssa had already done so much for her. That did sort of make Alyssa annoyed as hell and Helga had agreed to come over to celebrate New Years.

That however was two days away, and Helga in the meantime had to busy herself with whatever work she could scrape by.

She was vaguely aware that in her dream she was in some sort of pain. Not physically, she usually drowned herself in medication at the slightest possibility of a cold to keep working. No, she was aware that her head was in a dark place and that was the source of the pain, along with the heart clenching raw feeling she felt in her chest. Deep, throbbing, nail clenching and squeezing pain.

It had been 5 years since she had a Christmas with her blood family. It had been 5 years since Miriam. It had been 5 years.

She did visit Miriam, if that made sense, but she never made it over during the holidays. She had a ritual to only visit the gravesite only during the anniversary of her death. She always brought flowers, usually whatever she could scrape by with or picked unceremoniously. Once she had stolen them off a light pole memorial. That had made her feel extra guilty and she never did it again.

But never during the holidays. She could bear the loneliness of the holidays. She thought she could.

She could she could she could.
She was lying back, face up, staring at the ceiling, too tired to sleep, too sad to cry. The phone that she had worked so hard to reconnect was by her side and she had attached it to the power point next to the bedside table. That did mean removing the plug from the crappy desk lamp she usually had there but well, it was a special occasion. She knew she needed the phone line back, they had already cut off the landline and Helga knew she needed something so people could contact her for work. As it was she had limited time to offer what with still being a student and working as much as she could. She could lie back in the dark for a short while just to make sure her phone got charged. The light switch never worked but that was okay, the darkness was okay.

30-year-old Helga was aware that this was a dream because she was not 21 anymore but this was a terrible winter, a dreary, sad one. She didn’t have enough money. She was working too much. She was tired. So so tired. And alone. So so alone. Phoebe had been in Hillwood at the time when she offered to visit Helga, Helga told her off, telling her to save her pennies for her parents. She didn’t want to see her smart best friend like this. And she wasn’t in the mood to entertain.

She looked at the phone cord again. The black rubber that stretched towards her clenched hand, into her phone.

She wondered if it would break easily if she wrapped it around her neck.

It would have been seen as an accident. She could pull it off. She was smart that way.

Anything was better than living through another lonely, tired Christmas. With no one to rely on.

Helga woke up slowly. She didn’t realise that she had been crying at that point.

She assessed her surroundings. Not the crappy bed of her very old apartment, nor the one she was used to in Miltown. She was in Hillwood, and she was in Arnold and Gerald’s apartment, on the old leather sofa. Quickly she made sure Arnold wasn’t awake and made her way quickly to the bathroom, so that she could wash her face and pretend she was okay.

Meeting Olga, and the possibility of having a family again must have triggered that doozy of a dream. Well, less dream and more memory. That had been a horrible Christmas. And a horrible New Year. It was not a good time for her and she had felt so lonely and tired and insecure that she had been this close to ending it. And the worst part was that it hadn’t been the worst day she had had.

She took a deep breath, and turned the tap to its coldest settings, splashing the ice cold water on her
She recoiled a little from how cold it was but it kept her anchored. Kept her awake and aware of where she was.

That was a memory of something that happened to her 9 years ago. She thought she was past this. Clearly she wasn’t.

She forced herself to remember a few things that she had achieved in the past decade. Namely that 1) she wrote for a living and did it well enough to sustain herself. 2) she had friendships that she had maintained for long periods of time, and had worked even harder to make sure she made new ones. And 3) she didn’t bottle up her problems anymore. She talked to her support network, her best friends. She talked to her drag mother more often. She kept in touch with Vivian Bliss.

She had achieved so much. This deal she had made with Olga was not going to detract from what she had done. And she was never going to let the Pataki name or what had happened in the past stop her.

That cold winter day back in early 2009 had been a sign that she was not doing alright. She was damned if she would let herself get that way again.

This decision had drawbacks. It meant that there was a distinct possibility that now she would be away from her friends once again during the holidays, in a place she had no idea if it welcomed her back. It had meant that she would have to actively talk to Olga Pataki and her league of extraordinarily pompous in laws. It meant that there was a distinct possibility that she was leaving something amazing to return to the place that didn’t see her at her best, with people like Harold who clearly didn’t like her, or people like Stinky who had preconceived notions of her being a stuck up bitch.

But well. She still had her friends who were supportive of her decision. They understood why she had to do it and they were okay. Eugene, her favourite roommate, started shouting his outrage, but settled down after awhile, and had assured her that everything was fine, and she had to hold him to that. Phoebe and Patty, who she was now going to be nearer distance wise, told her that they supported her decision, and Phoebe had slipped in a quiet proclamation of how proud she was of Helga for making such a mature decision. They both cried after that. Franny P, her agent, who received the news after the three of them did, told her to do what she had to, she could work near anywhere and she could still get gigs for her best client.

And it wasn’t like she was going in entirely friendless in Hillwood. Arnold had spent the rest of the night with her, drinking wine, holding her hand and telling her that his and Gerald’s apartment was always open to her, no matter what. Nadine, he reassured her, would do the same. And Helga, a person who normally didn’t trust anyone at their word, believed him wholeheartedly.
The handholding was nice too. He had lovely, large hands. And when he gave her that long tight hug at the end of the conversation, she had burrowed a little into his chest. It was a good chest, fuck the naysayers, she had to do it for her friends who would never forgive her if she didn’t. And sue her, she needed comfort, it had been a long, horrible day.

She took a deep breath and stared at herself in the mirror. A tired Helga G Pataki stared back, shadows under her eyes, blonde hair mussed, but blue eyes slowly gaining back their flame.

Helga G Pataki was going to be back in Hillwood.

Helga G Pataki was not a quitter.

And Helga G Pataki was still alive.

She may have been tired, and stressed out, but Helga’s head was in a better place now. She had a strong support system, that grew stronger every day. She was not alone. She had a chosen family that loved her back.

No way was she letting anything take her down without a fight.

Chapter End Notes

Second arc complete. The final arc and time jump will commence in three...two... one....
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

So.

Remember how I mentioned there was a time jump from the last chapter till now. What I didn’t realise was that there was going to be an actual time-jump as well from then till now.

The short answer for what happened to me? I started a new job, and I also had a very very minor breakdown. For months I was blocked. The first 2000 words for this chapter was slow going, mainly because for a while I was so blocked I just couldn't write anymore. Also my actual job required writing that for most part was great for me, but one aspect was draining my soul so so much that I nearly felt like quitting work.

If it were not for my friends in the Discord, my friends in real life, and my partner...there was a distinct possibility I would have given up on everything I wrote here.

It sounds very dramatic, but I had to take some time off for myself and to finish writing this chapter. This was very slow going, and I sincerely apologise if parts seem disjointed and off. But please, don't give up on this story. I plan to take this monster down with me like a Jaeger takes down a Kaiju, and I will survive this.

Please do keep reading this fic that I am presenting to you with hands that are frankly rather tiny and weird as, and I really hope you guys are out there, and okay.

The streets of Willow and Dean still retained their cracked, grimy appearance as a figure stepped out of the bus.

Shaking her head to get rid of the headache she had accrued inhaling the fumes and sitting in a particularly bumpy bus, she took a deep breath through her mouth and released it, visibly heaving her shoulders as she did so.

It had helped, though very little, and she had decided that she really could use a glass of water.

That wasn’t a huge issue. She could always get some where she was going.

Standing on the pavement, she looked up towards the old, cracked building where she was going, the windows dark and tinted against sunlight, the roof dusty from lack of cleaning. It had clearly seen better days.

The last time Helga G Pataki had set foot anywhere near the place, she had been 12, upset and angry. It had been a place of comfort and warmth despite the clinical purpose of most of her visits. And she had missed all that. In her last two visits back in Hillwood, she didn’t visit the office as Dr Vivian Bliss had never been around at the time, her unexpected trips coinciding with Dr Bliss own trips out of town. But well. She was going to live in Hillwood full time, and there was finally a window in Dr Bliss’ calendar.

She had to suppress a wry grin at that one. She was trying to make an appointment with a doctor.
Even her own therapy appointments on her insurance were easier than this.

She crossed the road and marched up the stairs. She had a lot she wanted to tell Dr Bliss.

“And you know how it is, how do you pose for a dust jacket photo?” Dr Vivian Bliss laughed. “I can do anything but sit still long enough to take photos.”

Helga laughed, and as she did she had to once again bask in the glow of being back in old, familiar territory. The last few times she and Dr Vivian Bliss had been in the same town they always made it a point to get dinner, eat ice cream out of the tub mixed with Baileys, and talk the whole night away. It was one of their traditions and they tried to keep to it every year, and they usually did it when Dr Bliss had a chance to visit Michigan. They always booked a hotel room, they always wore PJs and they always had a good time. This time though, Helga was not staying over at Dr Bliss’ office, she had come over with a purpose, and a request for the doctor.

But first: catching up. Dr Vivian Bliss had just returned from her newest book tour, where she managed to stop by a town to take part in ...

“The Spartan Race!” Dr Bliss exclaimed as she poured Helga a cup of tea, “was amazing, and Helga, you really have to join me on one of these things one day, I think you’re in shape-“

“Hell no,” Helga had quickly said. “Nope. Nope nope nope. Not even in a million years-“

Dr. Bliss was laughing now, and she often did when she was teasing Helga. While Helga was athletic and pretty sporty, she really wasn’t into something as gruelling as the Spartan Race of all things.

Maybe she was getting soft in her 30s. That could be it. Baby Helga could have taken on the world. Adult Helga wanted to stay in and sleep. And to think she had wanted to become the president before hitting 35 back when she was a kid. She was leaving that up to the other women, she had so many things she had to handle right now, including some...possible emotional developments she really had no idea how it happened.

But that was later. Not now. Not when Dr Bliss and her were having such a lovely time. Start with the easier questions.

“So what brings you back to see me, Helga?”Dr Bliss asks , settling in with her cup of tea. “I am sorry I didn’t manage to see you in your last few visits here, and I know the move here must have been very stressful- how is that going, by the way?”

Helga groaned. “I packed up years worth of stuff in boxes I never want to see again.” She said, running a hand through her hair. Her bangs had been cut the other day and she hated them, they were at the short but still awkward looking stage, so they were hard to style. She had recently chopped off her hair to a choppy shoulder length, the ends now a faded cotton candy pink. She was considering maybe going a fire engine orange, it would be a nice change of pace instead of pink all the time. “Years and years of clothes, figures, books, all shipped back. I’ve made the mistake of buying so many books in my lifetime that moving them all back has been a huge mistake. I had to make a decision on moving some back. It took Eugene and Phoebe sitting with me to help me pack.”
Eugene had not been super helpful, making a case to keep near every single item Helga had ever owned, but Phoebe the saviour had been methodical and logical and Helga managed to get a large set of books to send back to Hillwood. She was leaving the other half of her books in the apartment she shared with Eugene.

It had been hard to explain her process but Eugene took it pretty okay. Somewhat.

“I refuse to let you throw away your scarf like how you are throwing me away!” He had declared.

Okay so not really okay.

“Usually I’m the one with the dramatic outbursts of emotion, Genie,” Helga replied calmly. “I’m the emotionally reactive one, you’re the happy one, that’s how we balance each other out.”

“But you’re leaving me, Hell Girl!” He pleaded. “We’re two peas in a pod, you’re the bodyguard to my Whitney, the Shakira to my Shakira, the Jiggly to my puff.”

"Nope, you can’t use that, Arnold has rights to it.” Helga replied back calmly. “Also I like that we’re both Shakira-“

"You know what I mean, Helga!” He cried. “I want to see the positive side in this but you’re my best friend, have been for the last few years of my life! We’ve never been away for so long, the longest we’ve been apart was a 15 minute drive away, and now you’re going back to Hillwood! Like a whole other side of the country away!”

It was here that Eugene and Helga took a break from packing to talk out their emotions. It was tiring but fulfilling. Eugene had been trying to push his negative emotions about Helga moving away but in this case he just couldn’t.

“Ultimately it was a matter of reassuring that I was doing this for a good reason and I was not leaving him completely,” she had ended. “Eugene isn’t completely over me leaving, and honestly I’m not over me leaving too, but I did it for a good reason.”

She leaned back against the couch, a little drained just remembering all the emotions from that story.

Dr Bliss nodded solemnly, and once again Helga had to quietly marvel over how her mentor had changed over the years. Vivian Bliss was apparently one of those women who aged gracefully, wearing her now completely white hair with dignity not many women had and also liked comfy sweaters and jeans when she wasn’t in her office skirts. Today she was barefoot, having kicked off her sneakers when she arrived in the office. Helga herself kicked off her own shoes and currently had her sock-clad feet tucked under herself where she was curled on the couch.

“So is he doing okay?” Dr Bliss asked.

“We still call once a day.” she laughs. “Eugene can’t function without me but he’ll cope. Like before I thought he was pining over Caleb-“

“ That’s the... hipster one, right?” Dr Bliss asked.

“ Yeah!” Helga said. “He hasn’t talked to him at all. I’m worried about him.”

Dr Bliss tapped a thoughtful finger against the ceramic of her mug. “Now Helga...”

“I know, I know, he has to manage his own problems.” Helga finished. “But he’s family. I can worry about family right?”
“Yes you can,” Dr Bliss smiled. “Speaking about family-“

Helga groaned, “Don’t start...”

“I have to ask, Helga!” Dr Bliss asked earnestly. “How is Olga?”

Helga rolled her eyes. In another life she would probably wince at her insensitivity towards her own sister. Thank god she was an atheist. “Not much change there,” she rolled her eyes. “Still being sweet as pie. Still making clueless comments thinking she knows better than me.”

Dr Bliss winced. Helga knew the feeling.

“When are your therapy sessions starting, Helga?” The older woman asked.

“In a month.” She replied, sipping some of her coffee. “I’m getting the house ready first.”

She was: the issue was the fact that Helga had absolutely no idea what she was planning to do with the amount of space she had suddenly inherited. She didn’t want so much space, she didn’t want anything familiar of certain spaces remaining. She certainly didn’t want to inherit the master bedroom in the house where Big Bob and Miriam slept, but neither did she want to sleep in her old room. She didn’t even know what she wanted to do with the third floor yet.

When she had walked back into the house, all those months ago when she first made the decision to move back to Hillwood, the first thing she did after the fateful decision was to go to the old house, and look at every room, from the living room to her own, and even the bathrooms.

That had been an emotionally-draining trip that she thanked her lucky stars she took the trip alone. The house had been rented out to others, but it still felt musty, old, stifling. The green wallpaper now peeling from the walls. The staircase railing, wooden, losing a bit of its varnish. The carpets were disgusting. At one point, she walked into her old room, and upon seeing the strange yet familiar fixtures, spent around half an hour crying, because who knew that she was back in a place she once thought was her haven but later realised was the source of her hell?

She calmly dried her tears, and took a deep breath.

Then she called the contractor and the architect to tell them her decision: she was renovating everything.

That had been a few months ago, and Helga had, in all that time, made the trip back to Miltown to do the necessary arrangements, finished up a manuscript, finalised everything she had to do with her lawyer in his office back in Michigan, packed up and ship some items from Michigan to the house. She had made contact with a contractor and interior design firm, and, through their advice, made the decision to strip everything from its own fixtures.

Gone were the old furniture, any old wallpaper that still remained on the walls. The floorboards were ripped up and replaced with new ones, she was pretty sure she might have gotten a splinter if she had decided to walk barefoot around the house. She got rid of all the carpets in the room, it was making everything mustier, and now it was steadily looking different from before. Helga had made several decisions such as tearing down the wall between Olga and Helga’s bedrooms to turn it into one room. The master bedroom where her parents slept was still empty: fuck if she was going to sleep there. She had been thinking of converting it into a study or something, even she wasn’t sure. And, lastly, the third floor stood empty, and she still had no idea what she wanted to do with the area. But
she was hoping she would get an answer to that soon.

“You still haven’t told me what you’re planning to do with the space, Helga.” Dr Bliss said, stirring a spoonful of sugar in her tea. “The last we spoke you said you didn’t want to take up all three levels, and you weren’t sure if you even wanted to live there by yourself, what with three levels being way too much. So what are you planning to do?”

Helga took a deep breath, to mentally clear her head. Check one, two, three.

“How’s the office space here anyway?” She asked instead.

“You’re deflecting,” Dr Bliss but her eyes were twinkling which meant she was going to indulge her ex-patient turned protege and friend. “Well you’ve seen the neighbourhood, and the rest of Hillwood. Everything’s getting more expensive. New stores have opened up. A Whole Foods recently opened up around the corner and new businesses are now offering the most ridiculous of things. Did you see that boba pancakes store that opened across the road? Absolutely ridiculous.”

She was stirring the tea in the mug she had in her hands, looking a little irritated and mournful. “My landlord’s going to increase the rental of my place to keep up. He hasn’t yet but you can tell what he’s going to do, he always looks guilty every time he sends me a note of recipient of the rental fees...” She took a sip of the tea and made a sound of satisfaction. “Good tea, yes?”

Helga nodded. Then she decided to proceed with her purpose of coming to see her mentor and friend.

“Dr Vivian Bliss—“

“Oh, you’re using the first name, it must be serious.” Dr Bliss joked, but Helga could see the concern welling up in her eyes.

“Dr Vivian Bliss,” she continued. “Will you do me the honour of changing your office address to Muholland Drive? And would you do me the dubious honour of being my one and only tenant?”

“Is that a really good idea, Helga?” Arnold had asked, a month before Helga’s visit to see Doctor Bliss. She had made a trip down to see the house and she had gone to visit Arnold, as it was then summer break, and the man had been finding ways to stay away from coursework to plan for the upcoming syllabus. That was hard for the man, of course: he radiated duty and honour, and if left to his own devices he would have been mid throes in coursework planning. However, the need to stay away was due to a simple fact: Arnold, who had caught a cold a while back, had resisted going to see the doctor due to the term paper marking and deciding the grades, and as such, had caused his body to give out due to overwork.

Helga, who never knew the man to actually throw himself so deep into working like that, was surprised. Then again, she knew the man wanted to make sure he did right by the students, and didn’t want their marking to be delayed by a few days. Sometimes the man was too nice for his own good. Having been unable to visit him during the worst of his illness, Helga had decided to visit the man and make sure he didn’t overwork himself during his summer holidays.

So she had managed to do so by crashing at Arnold and Gerald’s place again, taking the opportunity to distract the blonde man from duty. It had been surprisingly easy: the man was game to do anything Helga suggested, and it included going on short trips to nearby cafes and shops, with
Helga doing the driving as the man was still not back to full-strength yet, as well as vegging out on the couch watching all the shows available when his body got way too tired to do anything. They had even managed to catch up watching Game of Thrones, with heated discussions between the both of them on what house they would serve. All in all, they had been enjoying themselves.

On a balmy evening, where the both of them were on the couch making sure they were taking advantage of the best of the air-conditioning, Arnold asked Helga what she was planning to do with the house, and how everything was going.

“I took out everything,” Helga declared. “Knocked down the walls, tore off the wallpaper, installed wifi and better wiring...it might even become the smart-home of my dreams. I think at some point I’m installing an Alexa, and I can pretend I’m magic or something.”

Arnold chuckled, but she could still see the concern in his eyes, and it was then when he asked her, frankly, if it was a good idea. She knew he was referring to the very extensive renovations she had planned, practically gutting the house from top to bottom.

“Yes,” She said resolutely. “It’s no longer a house that I know, and that’s good. It can finally do some good in the neighbourhood maybe. I...I had good memories there, but I also had terrible ones. I’m gonna make it so that if I’m staying there, I’ll be creating new memories. Or something. Besides, the house was at least twenty years old, and it needed some upkeep.”

She did not mention the small breakdown she had when walking into her old room, ages and ages before. It had felt way too much, and way too soon. At one point, after opening the window to air out the bedroom, she had turned back to look at the closet door where had housed near a good portion of her childhood. Obviously the room had been cleaned out, empty, but she opened the door all the same, a part of her hoping for even a small vestige of herself left in there.

Obviously, there was nothing. It was empty. Just like how Helga sometimes felt she was.

So that may have made her cry a little, by which she actually meant “a lot”, and then spend the rest of a good hour in a dissociative state. But that was months and months ago, and should not be brought up in polite company.

Arnold had made a noise that meant he sympathized, even if he wasn’t aware of her inner turmoil. He had tried to move over to give the woman a hug, but then huffed suddenly, collapsing into himself. “Damn body,” he muttered, and Helga laughed softly.

“You knucklehead.” She chided, “What were you doing getting all crazy exhausted on yourself in the first place?”

Arnold sighed, “Look, I’m sorry okay, I just...” he was silent for awhile, and Helga could see how the cogs in the man’s head were turning, as though he were mulling hard over what he wanted to say next. Helga rolled her eyes.

“Just, don’t push yourself like that again.” She said. Arnold, who was leaning back against the back of the couch, made another small huff in return, but at least he was smiling.

“For your, Helga? Anything.” He murmured, and the deep tone he said that in, the way it was a small rumble rather than the usual, easy-going lilt he had, the kind where his voice settled deep into his chest, made Helga’s eyes widen, and she turned to look at the man in question who was looking at her through half-lidded eyes, looking at her through his lashes. He had a small smile playing on
his lips and Helga could feel her heart clutching just a tiny bit more.

She was having more of these attacks after declaring she was going to move back to Hillwood, and in the last few months after every phone conversation with the blonde man. And the attacks have been getting stronger.

Maybe it was a sign she needed proper therapy, cause obviously the way her talks with Arnold were going, she was not doing very well.

A doctor, even…

Doctor….

OF COURSE!

“ FUCKING HELL WHY DIDN’T I THINK OF IT!” Helga roared, the cogs in her rather fuzzy brain FINALLY working for once since accidentally delving into the terrible terrible situation that was her life. “A doctor in the house!”

Arnold, who had not been privy to Helga’s thought processes, was understandably confused but Helga was up on her feet now, cause her head was dizzy with the possibilities. Of course, of course! Her one way of doing good and repairing her karma!

“ Dr. Bliss! Of course!” She couldn’t help but smile now, damnit she was a fucking genius. “ I can give Dr Bliss the office she properly deserves!”

“ Your old therapist?” she could vaguely hear Arnold asking. “ What’s wrong with her office?”

“ Bleah, after a good 20 years that office should be condemned,” Helga scoffed. “ Pipes bursting, cracks in the ceiling, so much mold…do you know her building’s been condemned for asbestos?”

“ Wait what? Then how is she not –“

“ Apparently it was a new type of asbestos, and rather rare, so the hipsters were all about it, and the landlord didn’t want to take a side-“ Helga waved a hand. “ The point is, she could move in with me! The building’s all good, she can have her office on the third floor, and-“ She was running around the room now, looking for her laptop. Were there any requirements to run a doctor’s office in a residential neighbourhood? She would need to make another trip to the furniture store, Dr Bliss would need a new couch, right? Did Dr Bliss want an Alexa in her office? Damnit, maybe even a new table, and a working toilet, was there even proper plumbing on the 3rd floor? She knew there were rooms there, but a working toilet? Or even a shower? Would Dr Bliss need a toilet with a shower? A sink? A bidet?! So many questions, she needed to write this all down, where was her phone?!

“ Helga!” That was Arnold, who had somehow managed to get up from the couch and shuffle over to where she was now, wildly searching for her phone, where the hell was it- and placed a hand on her shoulder. The rather clammy feel of the hand then reminded her of a few things, namely that she had left her phone in the bathroom and that Arnold was still not up to full strength and there should not be ambling after her like a very weak confused zombie, and so she squawked and shepherded Arnold back on to the couch like a very angry and protective shepherd looking after a particularly adorable sheep who was probably just a tiny bit silly.
“Look I think you should consider asking Dr Bliss first?” Arnold mumbled as she made him sit down on the couch, fussing over him by throwing a quilt over him. This one was a particularly fuzzy one that she had stolen off Gerald’s bed, he wasn’t around, she could trust Arnold to lie about it. “She could have other plans, you know-“

That was…actually very sensible. Damn this man and his sensibilities. He was the very embodiment of a Jane Austen novel…title. The very specific one.

“And that, Doctor Vivian Bliss, is why you should move in with me, “ finished Helga.

Dr Bliss had been sitting through Helga’s entire proposal in shocked silence. Helga didn’t know whether to be pleased at the response or to be worried.

“Dr Bliss? You can say no, of course, I just wanted to ask if you would be-“

“Helga, I would have to think about it, of course.” The woman said quietly, “I cannot accept this offer, and –“

“Just, THINK ABOUT IT!” Helga pleaded. “For me, at least! You’ve been my guiding light, my inspiration, my helpline when things were dire, and this is the one way I can help you! You don’t have to move in, if you don’t want to. Just… I want you to think about moving your practice to a place with stability, and where you can practice for as long as you want, or space where you can be you, and you can write in peace without having to worry about a toilet, you know? I actually looked into bidets, by the way, you should totally have one, I am having one installed in the second-floor bathroom-“

“I assure you, Helga, I will be perfectly fine with any toilet you choose to install in any bathroom, but am I the right person?” Dr Bliss asked, eyes shining, but still apprehensive. “I am older than you are-“

“I’m not asking you to be my sugar mummy, Vivian, I already have complicated relationships with people I know and currently live with-“

“And this is a big offer, Helga.” Dr Bliss said gently. “I know you want to create good memories out of this house, but offering me this place-“

“Dr Bliss, I’m begging you to really consider this.” Helga pleaded. “You’ve been my rock when I needed guidance, and without you, I would never have figured out that I had a network of people who loved and supported me, and who showed me what family really was. You were the one who encouraged me to write, and you were the one who managed to talk me through a terrible time in my university life when I was almost ready to give up on everything. I want you to give that gift to all the kids out here in Hillwood who don’t have that chance, no matter who they are. Look at Phi. She was raised with the best of care and money and she somehow managed to be as screwed up as me. Lots of kids out there are scared, confused, and lonely, and you’re providing them the care and concern they need. Please. At least consider it. I drew up plans, I had a lawyer look through this, we can easily convert the entire building into three separate floors, and you will never have to answer to a creepy landlord. Just me. Please.”

The older woman looked like she wanted to argue with Helga again, but Helga knew that she was not going to let go until she got her to agree about at least think about it. She nodded, “I…will take
Helga, wan face but triumphant, grinned. She somehow knew that Dr Bliss would, eventually, agree to become her tenant, but in the meantime, the small victories were something she could get.

The older woman rolled her eyes, but she smiled at the blonde woman, “Again, I want you to know I am really thankful for your generosity...”

“Think nothing of it, de nada.” The woman waved a hand in dismissal, as she pulled out her phone. “I’ll get the contractor to forward the floorplans over to you, I think he has them in PDF, wait, let me just text him.”

The two women sat there in comfortable silence, while Helga was fiddling with her phone messaging the contractor in question. Then...

“Helga, did you just say you were having complicated relationships with people you were living with?” Dr Bliss frowned.

Helga’s fingers nearly lost grip on her phone, but she managed to catch it before it slipped and hit the ground. Thank god too, it was a new phone.

“Erm…” she said eloquently, thinking back to that same night she decided to get Dr Bliss to move in.

Helga huffed in exasperation and rolled her eyes, but her smile betrayed her. She took the opportunity to ruffle the man’s hair, and she could almost swear the man leaned into her touch.

The poor man was touch-starved. Maybe she should consider finding him someone. It didn’t seem right that he of all people had no one to look after him.

Besides her, of course, but she was merely a concerned friend.

She went to the bathroom to grab her phone, as well as a glass of water she filled up and passed to the rather weak blonde man.

“Thanks,” she heard him murmur. Seeing him, curled up so much smaller than his usual 6-foot frame, was really getting unsettling. The man had not mentioned his illness at all when she was back in Miltown, and had insisted on her staying on their couch again when she was in town, before the house was finished and the furniture came in. When Gerald had mentioned, in passing, that Arnold had been admitted to the hospital for fainting in the staffroom on the last day of school, two weeks later, she had been livid. The woman had been on her way from the airport to her house to meet with the contractor when she saw Gerald’s text, and she marched her way to Arnold’s apartment to yell at him for being an asshole and not tell her that he had been to the hospital. She had then proceeded to yell at him for thirty seconds before she took in his appearance: pale-faced, blonde hair in disarray, dark under-circles, clutching on to his blanket. She then rolled her eyes, marched Arnold back to his couch and ordered him hot soup from a delivery app.

And so here she was, when she hadn’t been at the house speaking to contractors or having short, civil meetings with Olga in a café.
“Helga?" Arnold asked, his voice small and a little sad. Helga shifted her thoughts to concentrate on the blonde man next to her, tilting her head and nodding for him to continue.

“Have you…I didn’t mean to fall sick like that." He mumbled, “I swear, I didn’t think I would make anyone worry like that-“

"Of course anyone will be worried!” Helga snapped, and she had immediately regretted the tone. She sighed. “Football Head, you’re a good friend of mine, okay? I would have been worried if someone close to me had to go to the hospital.” The man was silent next to her, and she took it as an opportunity to continue, “I was angry that you didn’t tell me, and honestly, I wished you had trusted me enough. You’re practically family. Família, famille…criminy, I wish I knew more words in different languages-“

Arnold chuckled, “The last one’s French, right?” he asked, shifting a little so that he was facing Helga. “I know a couple of words. Remember when we were kids and we had that whole penpal thing going on? I was exchanging letters with this girl called …Cera? Clementine? Celine?”

"Cecile-“ murmured Helga who was not paying full attention to what he was saying, until she realised what she was saying and then her throat seized up and it was like, WHAT THE HELL WAS SHE EVEN SAYING FUCKING HELL-

“Ah, yeah! That was her name!” she could hear the man laugh again over the sound of her impending heart attack. “She taught me a few French words…do you know she came down to Hillwood once?”

ABORT. FUCKING ABORT. ABORT.

“That’s…wow!” Helga had managed to grit out before the forces holding her throat and sanity hostage. Civility seemed like the right way to go, so she smiled and asked, “Was she…was she nice?”

It was there that Helga had decided that if she had ever decided to get into BDSM, she would be perfect as a switch, because she was clearly very good at inflicting pain on herself, and she was clearly doing it more often. She could hear Arnold patter on about Cecile, but she wasn’t exactly sure what he was saying, so she slapped herself to listen properly-

“So to cut a long story short, I was having a nice dinner with a complete blonde stranger, and she wasn’t even French, she was American, she practically catfished me-“he shook his head ruefully. “The real Cecile showed up, the blonde one then disappeared, I swear to you she just freaked out when she realised the real one appeared, and then she apologised to me for not being able to tell me who she was-“

Fucking hell, when put that way, she had been creepy when she had been a kid. How was it she hadn’t been registered as a sex offender back then? Was there a minimum age to be a sexual predator? This was why she was glad she was born and raised in the 80s, and not right now, when hearing her exploits meant hearing about how weird she had been expressing her feelings back then. What was the phrase again? “Seducing people with awkwardness”? That seemed to apply. The kids on Tumblr would be having a field day. She could see them now with their technicoloured hair making hashtags screaming #justiceforarnold or #shortmanwasshortchanged, and making protest posters using her face in a aesthetically pleasing moodboard.

“Creepy girl, Football Head,” she drawled. Maybe if she was blasé about it, he would be too. “I’m
surprised you didn’t report a creeper like her to the police or something.” There. Perfect response. She should win an Oscar or something, maybe a Tony-

“I don’t know…” Arnold mused. “That girl… honestly speaking, by the end of the dinner, I just thought she was nice, you know? The whole time she kept trying to impress me, and pretending to be sophisticated and very French? That was just confusing as hell. But then, she saw I was upset with Ruth-“

Ruth? She could vaguely remember a brunette with wide set eyes, perky brown hair, and who had an obsession with breadsticks. Damn, now that she thought about it, Ruth looked like a preppy housewife who was all about country club memberships and perfect vacant smiles, who was into doing the bus boy at the back of the country club when she was bored. Damn, the Ruth in her memory and her mind was a cliché. Definitely not someone Arnold would get along with...

“And she gave me really great advice, you know? About liking someone who was genuine and kind, no matter who or what they looked like on the outside.” Arnold paused, and then laughed, “A bit funny really, considering she turned out to not be Cecile, but hey, I had a great time…” Arnold looked up at the ceiling, and then back at her. “I thought I knew her, you know? And she obviously knew who I was, but it was hard, figuring out who she was and what she wanted with me…”

Helga was pretty sure she had something to say but her mind was drawing a huge blank.

“I never got to see that girl again,” Arnold continued quietly. “But the last few days, especially recently, I have been thinking about her, you know?”

Helga didn’t understand when or how she had stopped breathing but when she finally did, she tried not to look like she had swallowed way too much air, opting instead to turn her head towards Arnold naturally, in the most natural way ever, naturally breathing. “In- in what way?” she asked, naturally (as per usual, naturally).

Arnold had paused. She seemed to follow the same beat. She realised that right then, right now, the both of them were on their sides, curled up on the couch, facing each other, the man with half-lidded green eyes, and herself. When did Arnold’s eyes get so green? Was it illness that made his eyes flicker with a sheen of clear electricity? That flush on his cheeks seemed to indicate the same, but she was very sure, very very sure, that Arnold was not saying this in the feverish fervour of a sick person, but with the calm clarity of a man who knew what he was saying.

“She was yelling at me at the time, telling me off about not being a person who was completely honest with my feelings?” he said, in that calm steady tone that for some reason made Helga’s heart pound faster, harder, all while the bottom of her heart was being pulled downwards, as though a sharp bit was determined to tear up the bottom and make every single bit of blood drain out and leave her empty. “And well, I’ve thought about it, and I realised a few things. Helga. I wanted to tell you this…”

“ARNOLDOOOOOOOOO~!”

And that had been Gerald, coming back in, half drunk and cutting off any other conversation she and Arnold were able to have that night. The man had leapt about a foot in the air when he heard Gerald come in, and his subsequent rushing off to drag Gerald back into his room and make sure the man didn’t choke on his own vomit and cry was a welcome distraction, because frankly Helga didn’t want to hear about how Arnold had managed to rumble on to her game of past creepiness
and decided he didn’t want to be her friend anymore. That had made her very sad, as though something was tearing through her heart.

Why WAS she feeling as though something was tearing through her heart? Over fucking Arnold of all people?

Oh fuck.

Oh motherfucking mother of dragons.

Oh Thor Odinson and his arms almighty.

Did Helga G Pataki have FEELINGS FOR THE FOOTBALL HEAD AGAIN?!?

She stood up calmly, and, without seeing if anyone else was noticing, said, “Please excuse me.”

No one had replied, because Arnold was now comforting a rather drunk Gerald in his bedroom, and denying ever stealing his fuzzy blanket.

That left the blonde woman to casually walk to the kitchen, find the drawer where the boys kept their spare plastic and paper bags, find a nice brown one, walk to the gloriously empty bathroom, and proceed to have a panic attack, all while taking controlled breaths through the paper bag chosen.

The paper bag helped, but not by much, unless she could reach inside her, grab her traitorous heart, place it in the paper bag, and then smash it to pieces.

Yeah, she was in deep shit now. And no amount of paper bags was going to help.

End Notes

I missed writing fanfic. I should go back and complete stuff I tried to do awhile back.

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