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CAGE

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Cage

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1

The cell door shut behind Agla's back with a smooth click. All the doors and walls in the new Hólmsheiði Prison were sound-insulated, so the women's wing was quiet in the evenings. There was no slamming, and no calls or mutter of televisions carried through from the cells of the other women serving their sentences there. Instead there was a heavy silence, which seemed to engulf her like water – and she was sinking slowly and gently to the bottom.

She had known that being locked up wasn't going to be a pleasant experience. A few years earlier she had been on remand for a couple of days while the market-manipulation case against her was being investigated, so she had been expecting something similar. But this was unlike anything she had anticipated. It was one thing to spend two or three days in a cell, at the end of which her lawyer had appeared like a guardian angel, sweeping her away to dinner; it was quite another to walk into this building that still smelled of damp cement and filler, knowing that it would be her world for the next year.

Now she had a month to go before she was eligible for parole. In her mind she had divided her sentence into sections: she had to complete half of her time and then the rest would be on probation. But now that the second section was within sight, she was consumed with trepidation. Somehow she had become the animal in the zoo that dared not leave its cage for fear of looking freedom in the eye.

As her time in prison had passed, she had found the cage an increasingly comfortable place to be; to the point where she was numbed by it. There was now something reassuring about having all her power taken

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away from her. The more she had complained about the hard mattress and the piss-warm shower, the more a simple fact had filtered through into her consciousness: whatever she did or said in here made no difference. Her own will was of no consequence.

She had the impression that life was progressing evermore slowly, and she was finding it increasingly difficult to make decisions. The warders would often suggest she played games or did some handiwork, or brought her books from the library; but she could no longer be bothered to play, work or read. The same seemed to apply to the other women. She'd seen those whose sentences had begun after hers turn up furious and bristling with pain, just as she had; but after three months all their fury had dried up, and now they hardly even spoke to each other.

Two of the Icelandic prisoners had arrived at the same time as Agla. With the justice system overloaded, like Agla and many others convicted of non-violent offences, they had had to wait a long time before they could start serving their sentences. Another woman had come here from a prison in the north, and one had joined them some time later. The foreign women were on the other corridor, so they had come and gone without Agla noticing. All of them had been mules – young women from Eastern Europe, dressed in track suits, with dyed hair and poor English. Like the Icelandic prisoners, they kept to their own corridor, but somehow their community seemed to be livelier, although the gales of laughter and the songs could sometimes turn into screams and fights.

At the beginning of her sentence, Agla had made daily visits to the fitness room, accepted interviews with the prison chaplain – if only to have someone to talk to – and made an effort when it was her turn to cook. Now, though, she no longer had the energy for any of this, and her fellow prisoners were lucky to get rice pudding and meat soup, as she couldn't summon the energy to cook anything more demanding. Not that they complained; they had probably stopped tasting any flavour in the food long ago.

She took the nail clippers from her vanity bag, then used them

to pick tiny holes in a sheet, so that she could tear it into strips. Two strips would definitely be needed, twisted together so they were strong enough. She had planned this a long time ago – when she had been informed that her probation was coming up, but she hadn't made a decision about a precise day. Earlier, though, just after the evening news on TV, she had had the feeling that it was now time. Her decision was accompanied by neither sorrow nor fear, but instead by a kind of epiphany, as if a fog in her mind had lifted and for the first time in many months she could clearly see that this was the right thing to do.

It took longer than she had expected to rip up the sheet, and when she wound the two strips together, they lost half of their length, and became a short piece of rope. She looked around and immediately saw the solution, as if, now that the moment was near, new possibilities were appearing that she had not seen before. She unplugged the power cable for the TV and unwound it from its coil at the back of the set. It would work fine; it wouldn't fail.

She made the sheet rope into a loop that would tighten around her neck, and then tied the loop to the cable. She got to her feet and went over to the radiator on the wall by the door. It was just about the only thing in her cell that anything could be tied to. Agla hoped it was high enough up the wall. She tied the cable to the top of the radiator and pulled at it – gingerly at first, afraid that the makeshift noose would give way, and then with all her strength. It seemed secure. She hoped that her body would not let her down at the last moment, responding with some self-preservation instinct and trying to keep her on her feet.

For a second the silence was broken by a blackbird's song, as it made its nest somewhere nearby. The thick walls were not able to stifle the cheerful birdsong, and it triggered in Agla an immediate desire to step outside into the fresh air and inhale the scent of the blossoming birch trees. But this urge disappeared the second the birdsong came to an end, and images of her mother and Sonja passed through her mind.

The pain and the regret that came with these thoughts were so bitter, her heart ached; but at the same time she felt a sense of relief that this would be the very last time she would be tormented like this. Never

again would she be outside these walls, having to stand alone, wondering why Sonja had abandoned her. Never again would she have to face the endless choices that freedom offered, and that, up to now, had mainly brought her misfortune. It came as a relief that her life was over.

She stood with her back to the radiator, pulled a plastic bag over her head and looped the noose about her neck. The moment she had tightened the noose, she sighed once, with satisfaction, and then sat down.

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2

The chill evening breeze left Anton shivering. He zipped up his coat and checked the time on his phone. Eight minutes had passed since Gunnar had taken the moped they had brought to where they had decided to hide it. The only reason he had brought Gunnar in was because of his moped. At one point he had considered taking his dad's car, because he could drive just fine, even if he was only fifteen and didn't even have a provisional licence yet. But taking the car would have been risky – especially if they were pulled over by the police – and if anyone was about, a car would be more noticeable than a moped with no lights.

He heard quick footsteps approaching him from behind, and he spun around. It was Gunnar, running towards him with his white helmet on his head like a giant mushroom. They had agreed to wear helmets the whole time, both to reduce the likelihood of the police stopping them and so that any security cameras wouldn't pick up images of their faces. Fortunately, though, there didn't appear to be any cameras here. He had been checking the area out over the past few days, and knew that the roadworks guys used a diesel generator for the lights and heating in their shed. But now everything was dark – so dark that the green hue of the northern lights dancing in the eastern sky was unusually bright.

Anton shouldered the backpack containing their tools, and they hurried on quiet feet over to the fence, where Gunnar took the wire

cutters from the bag and started making a hole big enough for them to crawl through.

'That's just a catflap,' Anton said. 'The hole has to be bigger. We need to get back through it with full backpacks.'

'OK,' Gunnar agreed, snipping a few more wires, but he was obviously tired already, so Anton took the cutters from his hand and continued the work. Even though these were decent cutters, brand new and sharp, the mesh was still unbelievably hard to cut. He had to use all his strength to break each strand.

To begin with they had planned to go over the fence, but the coils of razor wire at the top put an end to that idea – they would have had to cut through that anyway, so it was as well to forget climbing and make a hole down here. It was also safer, as there was less chance of them being seen at ground level.

'Give it a pull now,' Anton said.

Gunnar twisted the tongue of mesh upwards so that Anton could crawl through, then Gunnar followed behind him. They jogged past the workmen's cabin to the storage shed behind it. Anton shook off his backpack, and they took out the head torches and fixed them to their helmets. He was pleased with this idea; they could see what they were doing without having to hold torches or a lamp.

'OK,' he said. 'Let's do it.'

Gunnar did not need to be told twice. He took out a hammer and began battering the padlock, while Anton set to work with a screwdriver, trying to unscrew the hinges. This was one aspect of the job they had not agreed on. They had spent time lying in the scrub, looking down on the place with a pair of binoculars, watching to see how the shed was closed and arguing about the best way to open it. It didn't seem to be a proper door, more a homemade job with a sheet of plywood that had been cut to fit the opening and fixed with hinges on the outside. After racking their brains for a while, they decided on both approaches; they'd see which was the one that got them inside the shed first. Anton knew that the method didn't matter. It was the objective that was important. But Gunnar seemed to think there was a principle

at stake, and insisted on smashing open the padlock, so Anton had accepted this compromise.

'There!' Gunnar whooped as the first of the three padlocks gave way and hung open.

'Cool,' Anton grunted, concentrating on the screws. He had removed them all from one hinge and was almost there with the second.

As he pulled out the last screw, Gunnar was still getting his breath back after the battle with the padlock.

Anton took the hammer from him, slid the claw into the opening and put his weight behind it. The door dropped out of the frame and hung on the remaining two locks on the other side.

'Yesss!' Gunnar crowed, his excitement obvious. 'You win. Ice cream on me after. You're the meanest gangster in town, man.'

He was clearly enjoying every moment.

Anton, on the other hand, was surprised at how calm he felt. He had been sure he would be more nervous. But now a warm feeling of achievement swept through him as he stepped inside the shed and the light on his helmet flickered over the boxes.

This was the first step towards his objective. He knelt down and opened the first box and began stacking sticks of dynamite in his backpack.

3

'I'm on the visitor list,' María said, her resentment growing deeper and stronger the longer she spent talking to the prison officer responsible for dealing with visitors.

She had booked this visit a good few days before, and refused to believe that Agla had now taken her off the list. As far as María was aware, she was the only visitor Agla ever had. Yes, the visits did seem to trouble Agla, but each one always lasted the full allotted time, even though it invariably descended into arguments and quibbling. And yes, María always had a long list of questions, which Agla usually avoided

answering, but her visits had to be about the only variation in the routine of being locked up. At least, María assumed that this was why Agla had put her name on the visitor list in the first place. It seemed to her highly unlikely that Agla had now changed her mind.

'You can call tomorrow to book another visit,' the prison officer said, tugging his shirt down over his paunch and stuffing it into his waistband. 'Agla can't have visitors today.'

'Why not?' María asked, leaning forwards, elbows on the table, driving home the point that she wasn't about to leave.

'She's indisposed,' the prison officer said, peering at the visitor list and scribbling a note on it.

'I want to know why,' María said. 'Or let me call her myself, so she can tell me in person that she doesn't want a visit.'

The prison officer sighed deeply.

'Agla can't see any visitors today. Try calling tomorrow.'

'I'm an investigative journalist and I demand to know why prisoner Agla Margeirsdóttir isn't available for a previously agreed visit. If I don't get an explanation then I'll have no choice but to take this to the Prison and Probation Administration.'

The prison officer sighed again, deeper this time, and his eyes rolled towards the ceiling.

'Sweetheart, this isn't Guantanamo Bay. We have a duty of confidentiality regarding the health of inmates, so all I can tell you is that Agla is unwell today, and that you can call tomorrow and book another visit.'

Now it was María's turn to sigh. This was as far as she was going to get for the moment. There was no point in taking out her frustration on the prison officer. In reality, she didn't suspect there was anything untoward about Agla's absence; she was simply impatient. This time the questions on her list were all unusually urgent – she wanted to know about Agla's links to Ingimar Magnússon and William Tedd, the Paris-based markets guru. She had come across both names during her investigation into Agla back when she had worked on economic crime for the special prosecutor. That had been in a previous life, before Agla had, indirectly, caused her to be sacked.

María let her thoughts wander as she made her way back to her car. Although the days had begun to lengthen, the April sun was still low in the sky, and she squinted into the brightness. It would be more pleasant when these knife-edged, blue-white rays gave way to mild spring sunshine. In this light everything seemed to be grey and forlorn after the harshness of winter. There was no sign yet of any growth and the sunshine beat down mercilessly on the dry moorland that replaced the bare earth as she left the prison behind her. Not that the time of year made any difference. She wouldn't be taking a summer holiday to enjoy the weather. She couldn't afford one. Her online news service, The Squirrel, just about made ends meet, but only because of the income from the handful of advertisements she had been able to secure. So far she hadn't been able to sell her material to any of the larger media outlets. Now, though, she suspected she was on the trail of something juicy. Just the names Ingimar Magnússon and William Tedd were enough to tell her she was on the right track.

María sat behind the wheel. Her heart skipped a beat when she noticed, hanging from the mirror, the little crystal angel that Maggi had given her. That had been a year before he had left her, saying that she wasn't the person he thought he had married. If she were to trace everything back to its origins, then the divorce could also be laid at Agla's door. Her whole life had been wrecked when she had been sacked by the special prosecutor, and for many months she had been in a kind of angry, disbelieving limbo. Finally Maggi had given up, saying that he no longer recognised her. If she were completely honest, she no longer recognised herself either.

It didn't do to think too much about Maggi – it would wreck her day completely. If she didn't take care and let herself drift too far, she would end up in tears on the steps outside his place. The worst of it was that, although she couldn't help hoping that he would ask her in and then would hold her tight, she knew full well that he would actually just look at her with a mixture of disgust and pity, before shutting the door in her face.

She started the engine and wondered whether she ought to rip the

angel from the mirror and throw it out onto the moor. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. Maybe she would do it tomorrow. In the morning she would call the prison and book another visit. And since she wasn't able to ask Agla her questions right away, she would have to start on Ingimar.

4

She had been more heavy-handed than usual today – to Ingimar's satisfaction. He was exhausted after being whipped, and he had needed her help to reach the bed afterwards. This was the best part of it, exactly why he came to her; the hour he spent in her bed on the borderline between sleep and wakefulness, overwhelmed by the adrenaline that his body automatically pumped into his bloodstream as the first lash of the whip burned into his back, and the endorphins that accumulated the longer the treatment lasted, leaving him in a daze.

In his younger years he had believed that what he craved was the humiliation – of being tied, manacled, hung from a hook and whipped; of being completely in her power. But now he knew better. The key to it was the vulnerability that came afterwards; his defencelessness as she helped him, sobbing and bruised, to the bed, where she would apply a soothing balm to his back, tuck him in and whisper sweet words that were both calming and encouraging, just like a mother with her child. This was when he felt he was truly loved; he revelled in lying in bed without having had to do anything to deserve it, not one single thing.

'You're a good boy,' she whispered, kissing the top of his head and leaving the room as he began to doze. He lay there in a dreamless state for a while, he had no idea how long, until his thoughts were again clear and linear, and he felt there was no longer any need to lie still. The time for rest was over. He got to his feet, pulled on his trousers and took his shirt with him to the kitchen where she was waiting for him with a smile.

'Let's take a look at you,' she said, examining his back. 'You're fine,' she added, handing him his singlet and helping him into it. It stung like hell, but he liked that. He would feel the pain for the next few days, every time he dressed, took a shower or leaned back in a chair, and that was the way he wanted it. This reminder was something he needed; the reminder that he was human. It was the same as the Roman emperors who had a slave walking behind them, whispering 'remember you are mortal, remember you are mortal'.

'I'll make a transfer to your account,' he said as he buttoned his shirt.

She stepped closer and helped him with the top button and knotted his tie for him.

'Not too much,' she said. 'You always pay me too much.'

'I'm grateful,' he said.

'You're still in a state when you make the transfer, so you make it too much.'

'It's no more than you deserve,' he said, kissing her cheek.

'Now you be a good little worm and do as you're told.' She smiled and winked as she teased him. 'Otherwise you'll feel it...'

He gave her an exaggerated bow.

'Yes, madame!'

They understood each other instinctively. She knew precisely when it was safe to inject a little humour into the game they played, and when things had to be kept serious as it was crucial to not lose the momentum.

'Call me whenever you want,' she said, holding the front door open for him.

He blew her a kiss on his way down the steps, and as was so often the case, he was astonished at the change he'd undergone since he had turned up here a couple of hours ago. He had walked in tense with stress and with his mind in overdrive, but now he was relaxed and his thoughts had clarified, as if his soul had been cleansed.

He started his car and turned up the heater. It wasn't particularly cold, but a whipping always left him with a chill that lasted a few hours. His phone showed one missed call and two text messages, all from the

same number. He opened the first message. It was a long one, from an investigative journalist called María. He sighed. He knew who María was: a former investigator at the special prosecutor's office who had fallen badly out of favour and who now ran her own online news outlet, an effort driven forwards more by determination than ability. She was the type who saw conspiracy everywhere she looked and who could make the most innocent thing look suspicious. The message was a series of questions concerning himself and Agla, and any business connections they might have.

That was something he could answer easily. Right now there were none. They had ended their joint business affairs some years before and since then had taken care to avoid each other.

He opened the second message and the flood of questions continued. This demonstrated an incredible optimism on her part. Surely she didn't expect him to answer all these questions by text message? Normally he kept clear of journalists and wouldn't have hesitated to delete these messages right away.

But the last question in the series troubled him:

What is the nature of the business conducted by yourself and William Tedd with Icelandic aluminium producers?