



**THE UNION
OF
SYNCHRONIZED
SWIMMERS**



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ANITA, HELSINKI

I meet Blue Flame a bit before the summer solstice. I'm sitting on the steps of the cathedral, leafing through a book of Finnish grammar, when I feel a new presence near me. He sits down casually, his dark blue wings settling calmly around him. He looks at me every now and then, not intrusively but tentatively.

Hello, he says. Because of the mask, his voice comes both from nearby and far away. He leans his golden upper body forward and presses his palms against the edge of the step.

What's up?

I close the book. My fingers are shaky. I'm sure I recognise his accent. I stick to English, the shared foreign language a bulwark between us.

I'm good, thank you.

What's your name?

Anita, I say, pulling the hem of the dress over my white knees.

Tell me, Anita, are you from here?

He clearly hasn't seen the book I'm reading, but what matters is that his question proves I look like someone who could belong here. The truth is, I've lived in Helsinki for almost a year, but the city feels as strange as it did when I arrived.

I've moved around my whole life. I don't really feel like I have a home anymore, I answer cryptically. But I'm trying to find it, I add.

He has a pensive look. People need stability, he says, as he lights a cigarette. He offers me one, but I refuse with a nervous hand gesture.

This year I have been to six countries and eighteen cities, he says, laughing.

Blue Flame, the Hunter of the Skies, Gold as the Sun and Blue as the Day, has hung from the Eiffel Tower and done cartwheels at the Piazza del Popolo in Rome. He was swinging from the trees along the Thames in London when an agent asked him to star in a television ad. He ended up dancing in the middle of a crowd while chocolate bars fell from the sky.

I look at him, the hero of my childhood cartoons;

the thin, glossy fabric stretches over his body, golden except for the beak and forehead, which are the same blue as the wings. His eyes are two narrow, dark holes. He has rolled up the mask above his thin lips.

When Blue Flame suggests we go for a drink, I have a chance to refuse and get rid of him. I don't need any reminders of what I've left behind. I have a lot to read. I bite my lips. Then I say: Yes. Why not.

As we walk across the square, I feel self-conscious of the fact that I'm walking next to a superhero and people are staring.

How does it feel when people stare? I ask.

Of course they stare! Blue Flame says. He has taken his mask off and now his voice sounds ordinary. The mask has left red marks on his forehead and cheeks, and his short hair is standing up. His face is long and full of acne scars.

It's part of the job.

We find a bar in a quiet alley, at the end of which a slice of the sea glares at us. We choose a table by the window.

The long, pointy wings hang elegantly on the back of the chair. The golden gloves lie on the table. Blue Flame is excessively cheerful when talking to the waitress: Some chicken wings, please?

I pass on the chicken wings but order a beer. Blue Flame slowly pronounces the name of our home country and nods. A tiny piece of land by the river. A country that isn't even a country. My palms begin to sweat, and I rub them against the hem of my dress.

People end up there by accident or because they have no choice, he explains. Most want to leave but cannot. My family is stuck there, you see, like a broken train.

But you aren't, I say, trying to shake the tension out of my voice.

No. I thought, why not leave, I am ready to do anything to get away. And whenever I feel like it, I will go back, he says.

If I blush, he doesn't seem to notice. I drink several glasses of water and chew on the ice cubes. I blink my eyes furiously to moisten my contacts.

So you were born here? he asks.

I could still say: No. I too left the place that everybody wants to leave. Instead, I hesitantly shake my head and lie about my parents. Artists, both of them, always on the move, I say, and wave my hand to wipe away distant memories.

As soon as the waiter places the beer on the table, I take a big gulp.

Where I'm from, everything is small and limited, Blue Flame says after a while, and dips a chicken wing carefully into the barbecue sauce. It's a place not good to people, he continues, and laughs dully, only to dogs.

I stretch my hands on the table, my nails like pink almonds, clean and symmetrical. His tanned fingers are fiddling with a small cross hanging from his neck.

I drink some more and feel relaxed. What brought you to Helsinki, I ask, of all the northern cities?

He sighs, taps his plate with the fork, and dramatically says: Longing.

I look at him. He shrugs, suddenly exhausted. He opens his mouth, then changes his mind and stays quiet. I wonder whether I dare order a second pint. Back home, women drink moderately, and mostly fruit wine.

He says in a half-whisper: I started to feel I was choking. Like I was living inside a box.

Something stirs in me, a form of compassion or recognition. Then I hasten to nod. I order a second pint, like women here do all the time.

Even though it's been a while now since I left, hearing my mother tongue always puts me on edge. Instead of warmth I feel annoyance, as if the language is mocking me. And so we go on talking

in English. The moment I could naturally tell him I speak the same language — his, our language — slides past.

The next day, I go for a long walk by the sea. The city seems kinder. At the marketplace I buy tiny fish wrapped in newspaper and eat them as I stroll by the cold green water.

On my way back to the city centre, I notice the gold and blue at the Senate Square. A few children have stopped to stare, and their parents awkwardly try to hurry them. Blue Flame is focused on his movements. He stands on his hands for a long time, then on one hand, spreading his legs slowly into an L-shape, one ankle skyward. Like a crane. Then he comes down to stand on his head and raises his arms in the air. He seems utterly separate from the landscape, as if glued onto it, and yet everything adheres to him: pavement, ice-cream truck, passers-by. I keep walking.

Last night, after many beers, we took this same street to the tram stop, where our paths forked. Blue Flame had lifted the mask onto his forehead like a headband, so four eyes were watching me. He ran his fingers gently along my waist — but then the tram

arrived, and when I stepped inside, he pushed me gently with his fingertips, sending me off. As the tram moved away, I still felt watched, by his own eyes and the eyes on the mask.

It's late at night and Blue Flame is leaning against the window sill. He looks around and takes a drag from a cigarette.

So, this is what the home of a Finnish intellectual looks like, he says in an ironic tone.

He has taken the mask off completely but is still wearing the costume. There's nothing Finnish in my flat, nor anything from my own country. Ten months haven't given it the slightest personal touch. There isn't even a bookshelf, only heaps of papers and books piled up.

I pace nervously in the space between the fridge and the table. I arrange olives and pickles into small bowls. I glance at the mirror and straighten an eyebrow with my little finger. Nobody has been here before.

Relax, Blue Flame says.

He dumps his cigarette in the one flower pot I own — filled, but only with soil — and lays his fingers

on my arm. I take my face away from the mirror and turn to him, careful not to move my hand.

The fingers close around my wrist like tentacles. Blue Flame's kiss is long, strong, and tastes of nicotine. He takes off his costume and places it carefully on a hanger, like he lives here. Then he puts his hand under my skirt. Suddenly two fingers are inside; I resist only briefly. Clothes drop on the floor like uncertainties. I bite my lip so that words in the wrong language don't spill out. We are about to fall on the bed when I command him, surprised by my own voice: Put the mask on. He gives me an annoyed glance. I avoid looking into his sweaty, dark face. He fetches the mask from the window sill.

First his fingers lay on my neck, then curl around it, simply holding it. Then they squeeze. I wriggle to break free. Meanwhile he's moving inside me, like he's trying to get somewhere. His short beak pecks rhythmically at the air. My body, exhausted, becomes still. I look into his deep, unblinking eyes. I start to think about the dim lamp of my childhood bedroom, spotted by disgusting flies. I try to speak but there's no air in my throat. Anyway, I wouldn't beg him to stop. I would urge him to go on. Продолжай, I'd say, as gently as I could.

The next evening, I only notice Blue Flame after I have arrived home, walked into the kitchen, and opened the fridge. I'm just about to grab a yoghurt, my eyes worn down by vocab lists, when I see him there, standing nonchalantly by the window. Did he climb through the window, up the branches of the pine tree?

He's smoking. The tiny butts building up in the flower pot look like abnormal carrot sprouts. I open the window wide and let the white-summer night sky enter. He gives me a bouquet of sunflowers that I place in water glasses around the flat. He has also brought French fries, which we eat sitting on the window sill. Afterwards, he puts on familiar songs, like 'On the Hills of Manchuria', and I tell him how lovely they are and turn the volume up. We dance a bit. The summer night goes on like a waltz. He checks out of his hostel the next morning and brings his suitcase to my flat.

I lie on a picnic blanket surrounded by birches. Blue Flame talks about our home country with a mixture of anger and tenderness. Maybe distance has made the latter grow. He does not hide or decorate. His words make me want to talk about it too: the smell of boiled apples, the horses, the bends in the river. The need to

speaking grows inside me, but I stay quiet and gaze at the bright green leaves against the sky.

I'm about to fall asleep when he begins to tell me about migrating olive trees: Like people, trees migrate, from one country, one continent to the other! This particular species of silvery olive trees, he explains, has spread across the Americas, but the first sprouts were brought by some homesick Eastern European settlers.

When I pronounce his name, I do it slowly and clumsily, like I am declining a Finnish verb.

Anita, now it is your turn to tell me something, Blue Flame says.

He's obviously right. He has spoken so much his voice is hoarse. He sits with his legs crossed, playing with a lighter. I sit up and anxiously brush my new blonde hair. I don't know what to say, so I recite a poem: the one about the science of departures. Blue Flame's eyes are glowing when I say the last line. He wipes his nose with his hand.

How do you know that poem? he asks.

I love Osip Mandelstam, I tell him. I've read everything. In English, of course, but the translations seemed excellent.

The intensive language course I enrolled in turned out to be a great idea. Not only am I starting to grasp little details about the language, but it's comforting, too: my feelings of loneliness are normal. To actually find a place inside this culture is hard, but possible. People have done it before.

In the meantime, Blue Flame is becoming increasingly nervous and disappointed. His mood changes abruptly, depending on tiny details, like a misplaced word or accidental laughter. If I forget to buy something he specifically asks for — vinegar, apple juice, mint tea — he calls me names I'd forgotten and which fill me with shame. He's counting his money now and staring gloomily into the distance.

Summers are the best working time for a superhero, Anita. I can't waste my days like this.

He's been squatting in my place for a month.

His voice breaks as he pulls at his hair restlessly. He jumps into the gold-and-blue costume and storms out of the room. I stay lying on the bed with just the sheets around my body.

One afternoon a few days later, he comes back cheerful and smelling of cologne. I'm too busy practising Finnish cases, so I ignore him. He puts music on. The horses of a war battalion gallop through

the room and cut across my thoughts again and again, until I realise I can't read anymore.

I can't read! I shout. Then I repeat it deliberately, looking into his small eyes.

He's frozen in the middle of the flat. I say his name, but this time as if it were a nuisance. He takes a step towards me. I curl up even more on the sofa and bring the book close to my face.

But my little flower ... Blue Flame blabbers awkwardly. His wings drag miserably on the floor.

I don't put the book down. He paces indignantly around the flat. He stops in front of the open window, stretches, and climbs onto the window sill. Slowly, he starts to bend himself into the position I've seen him do at the Senate Square. Soon half of his body is outside the window. I scream, rush to him, and force him back in. We stand opposite each other: he hugs me, I slouch.

You've become very cold, he says, in a deeply wounded voice.

I lean my head against his shoulder and whisper how sorry I am. I breathe in, trying to fill my lungs with the sweet smell of apples before it disappears.

Little flower, Blue Flame says again, cringingly.

He puts the mask on and we fuck on the floor, like

stray dogs do back home, on the edge of the field. I hear my voice from far away when I suggest that we change positions. I'm too old for this, I laugh. That's when he clutches my hair and bends my head back. He seizes me from the hip. My knees scratch against the floor and his fingers dig into my skin. I stay still like furniture, so it hurts less.