

Amber Strongblade
ON THE RUN

FREE SHORT STORY 2020

I. Em

The woman who looked just like me stood just a step away from the edge, her dark eyes fixed on the beautiful view beyond the body of water in front of her.

I could tell that it was a view of my town. They say that there's no place like home, but I didn't really understand what it meant until I finally found mine. And it was fully clear then, more than any time before.

The woman who looked just like me surely felt the same way I did, too, because the expression on her face was the same I wore everytime I looked at my town from the top of the Puijo tower.

The man who looked just like *him* appeared a moment later and went to stand next to her. They both watched my town in silence, their fingers tightly intertwined as they held each other's hand.

I should have told *him* how I felt before he left, but that's easy to say in hindsight. Still, I wonder what it would have changed.

The woman and the man exchanged a look full of tenderness and understanding, then their eyes drifted back to the beautiful view as they took a step forward to stand at the very edge.

Time seemed to halt for a second before the two of them took another step forward, falling into the water together.

That very water filled my lungs and I felt panic wash over me as I began to suffocate.

I felt disappointed when I woke up in my apartment. I should have felt relieved to realize I wasn't actually drowning, but I didn't. Back then I thought for sure that death would be my only way out of this dreadful existence that had no hope nor comfort for me. The one thing preventing me from giving up was the knowledge that Jukka was out there somewhere, and that one day

perhaps I would see him again. But I hated every second of that wishful wait.

I lay there thoughtful for a handful of minutes before I finally got up. I had no time to waste wallowing on self-pity. I avoided going out and hid in the little fortress I had turned my place into as much as I could, but I was almost out of supplies and of options. Outside was the only destination.

I shuffled across the messy living room to grab my knife from the table, sparing the streets below a glance through the holes in the dirty curtains shielding the window. The packs of Diseased that roamed around seemed to grow bigger every day, so I pocketed a couple of extra backup knives just in case.

I walked to the kitchen, careful not to step on any of the leftover food, torn-up clothes and bloody rags that littered the floor. I'd love to blame the state of my apartment on the whole apocalypse thing, but to tell the truth it was already in that state before. Well, maybe without the bloody rags.

The window in the kitchen overviewed the backyard of the building, which was usually devoid of Diseased thanks to the high fence surrounding it. It seemed just as quiet that morning, so it was perfect for my plan. I swiped my map of the town from the counter under the window then jumped out, landing heavily on the big bin I had placed there.

Anxiety took hold of me then and I don't remember most of what happened up until I met the twins, but I distinctly recall looking back to the building before I climbed the fence.

It was almost as if I could feel that this was the last time I would ever see it standing.

II. Jukka

The road that stretched ahead between the trees seemed endless as I stared out into the distance that morning. We had just found enough weapons to equip all of us and we were about to finally head back home to our families and loved ones, if we still had them.

There was no doubt in my mind that Em was okay. She was fragile, and yet she was the strongest person I had ever met. Besides, I could simply not imagine that she would die before I told her how I felt. Both my heart and the shotgun in my hands seemed to me like the heaviest things I had ever carried.

“Yo, Jukka,” I heard Olli's voice call behind me. “We're ready to go. Get your ass in the bus.”

I turned to our trusty tour bus, once shining, now covered in scratches and mud, and almost ran to it. Time was of the essence, especially in that moment. We all had someone important to protect, and making our way from Tampere to Kuopio was not going to be swift and easy. So I jumped into

the bus and went to stand by my good friend Pasi, who closed the door behind me and turned on the engine.

We left Tampere in a hurry, and as I looked in front of me I saw that the road stretching ahead between the trees seemed just as endless as it did minutes ago. But as we weaved through the burnt down cars and the shambling Diseased I remembered that the road was *not* endless. After all, the road never was. I had an aim. I was on my way back to Em and I was going to find her. The world was done for and so both the tour and the band were over now, but I had one thing left. The one thing I knew I would never lose.

“Go as fast as you can,” I told Pasi, who nodded determinedly as he accelerated.

III. Atte

The first shot was the hardest one to take, but the next three were actually easier. Two for each. One to bring them down, one to make sure they were dead. Despite all the things I've seen and done since that day, the feeling that washed over me in that moment still haunts me. I guess that's fair, though. After all, it's not everyday you have to kill your parents. And I know it wasn't really them anymore, I know it was them or me. I knew even then. But it didn't save me from the guilt.

The handgun slipped from my hand as I stared at their unmoving bodies, and the loud sound it made upon hitting the wooden floor of my parents' living room shook me awake.

I couldn't stay. I had to get out of there.

Air. I needed air.

Thankfully my blank mind and trembling limbs did not keep me from thinking about retrieving my ice hockey stick before I rushed outside.

The air refreshed and soothed me though I found it reeking of Diseased. It still helped. I stood there with my eyes closed, trying to breathe deeply as I clutched my hockey stick tight.

That's why I didn't hear it approach. I raised my head at the last second, only to see the shambling mess collapse to reveal my sister standing behind it, swinging her bloody baseball bat with a deep frown.

“Not my brother, you rotten asshole,” she spat.

“Aina!” Relief struck my heart for but a second, but then all I could do was stutter, “Aina, I'm sorry. I had to kill our parents...”

“It's okay, Atte,” my sister said as she pulled me into a hug. “It's okay.”

We stood like this for a while, I don't know how long. I was happy she had come back from her

trip for me. We're twins, but she always felt like my older sister. And technically she was, by a few minutes. In any case, I knew I would be safe now that she was with me.

That's of course when Em ran into us. Literally. She rammed into us so strongly that we both stumbled. Em herself fell hard on her back with a groan. The three of us glanced questioningly at each other for an instant that seemed to stretch on forever, until I finally remembered my manners and offered the unknown woman a hand.

“Are you okay?” I asked, genuinely concerned.

Em ignored my hand and got up on her own, but I didn't feel insulted. We were all survivors in a new and dangerous world. Trust wasn't high on the list of priorities.

“I'm fine,” Em mumbled with a reluctant nod of thanks to me.

“What were you running from?” Aina chimed in.

“Nothing. I'm looking for supplies and I'd like to return home sooner rather than later, that's all.”

“Oh, you live around here?” I wondered out loud with a bit too much disbelief in my voice.

“Yeah, I do.” Em crossed her arms and gave me a disdainful glare. My cheeks turned bright red. Of course she could live here even if she obviously wasn't born in this country. Especially Em. Em is more of a local than most locals are. What an idiot I was, back then.

“My brother can be an ignorant child sometimes, but he means no harm,” Aina said, shaking her head. “So, what's your name?”

Em hesitated but eventually extended her hand and answered, “I'm Em. Nice to meet you, despite the circumstances.”

Aina smiled.

IV. Mikko

I never liked crowded streets. When I moved from Helsinki to Kuopio for my studies, the first thing I noticed was how peaceful the streets were in comparison. I fell in love with the town instantly. Guess I've always been a town guy. Cities are just the worst, aren't they? Well, of course that day the streets weren't particularly peaceful. As I recovered an arrow from yet another disgusting head, mumbling insults under my breath, I hated Kuopio as much as I hated Helsinki. Nothing really mattered anymore, though, so I didn't care.

I just needed a damn coffee.

Seriously, what dark times are upon us when you can't get a good coffee in Finland?

I reached my favorite café eventually, and felt true happiness as I entered and breathed in coffee's

lovely scent. My joy was short-lived. I rummaged behind the counter for ages, but you can't run from the facts: others had looted the place before I arrived, and they had let nothing for me to soothe my desperate soul.

"I can't believe this," I sighed. I felt so angry. If the zombies or Diseased or whatever they called the things had *warned* beforehand, I would have had time to stock up. But no, of course.

I had no coffee, neither did the stores, neither did the cafés, and now what was I gonna do?

Back out in the street I nervously paced in a random direction, my exhausted brain struggling to calm down. Then I heard a set of voices I vaguely recognized calling me from afar.

"Mikko?"

"Hey! Mikko!"

At first I thought I had definitely lost it, but then my eyes found Atte and Aina, standing next to someone I didn't know but who had some cool digs on.

"Well, if it isn't the super twins," I said, too angry still to appear glad to see them. But I was glad to see them, of course, and not just because I knew Aina liked to hoard coffee.

Honestly, I was just really relieved to see that Atte was okay. I had thought about him a lot since the Diseased had reached our town, wondering if I should try to find him. I hadn't, because it was kinda lame, and I guess that's kinda lame too. Also I believed Aina was with him anyway, and not only was she much more capable of protecting someone than I was, but I thought she didn't like the way I cared for her brother as well.

Whenever we met at a reunion of the University's sports club back in the days, she gave me the stink eye everytime I glance his way. Scary. Man, I really love those two dummies. I'm so glad I met them that day. Things would have been different if I hadn't, right?

V. Savolainen

Oddly enough, the time it took me to reach Jyväskylä didn't seem that long. Maybe all the things they injected me made me stronger, somehow. It didn't make me prettier, that's for damn sure.

Anyway, people always say that there's not much to see in Jyväskylä, but it's not worse than anywhere else. I guess everywhere kind of looked the same to me, back then. In any case, I had been running for days and wasn't even out of breath, so it was time to pick my next destination. Northward was the way, but even monsters like me needed supplies to survive. I had to pass through a town, especially since what I had found in Jyväskylä was pretty sparse, or I would never reach Norway.

Kuopio was close, easy to reach, and kind of on the way. I resumed my run with no idea of what awaited me in this unknown town.

Had I known, would I still have made my way there? Sometimes, I wonder. But I'm glad things happened the way they did. Yeah, as stupid as it sounds, I really am.

VI. Aina

There's nothing like the end of the world to put things in perspective.

That day, I did about everything I used to hate: I travelled, I stained my clothes, I calmed my brother down, I met someone new without prior preparations, and of course on top of that Mikko showed up. And then it all happened again in reverse order. In the list of my best days, this one doesn't make the cut. Honestly the next one was much better. But that's not what we're talking about now.

After Em and us literally stumbled upon each other, we talked for a bit about our stories, then she insisted on bringing us to her apartment, proudly explaining that she had fortified it herself. Unfortunately, before we even got to lay our eyes on it, we heard a deafening crashing noise, and rushed to see that the entire building had collapsed on itself. Em seemed really upset, but we didn't get a chance to cheer her up as this is when Mikko entered Atte's line of sight. We called for him and he joined us, looking even more haggard and pale than usual.

Mikko has never been my favorite person, but we were friends, before all this. The three of us were. We were very involved in our University's sports club, that's how we met, but on paper we didn't really have much in common apart from that. Mikko studied sciences, Atte was in literature, and I was a language student. And yet, we were so terribly awkward that we ended up spending all of our free time together just so we wouldn't have to go through the process of meeting new people. Atte even ended up having feelings for Mikko, for reasons that I simply couldn't see at the time. Guess he saw past his mask before any of us did.

But anyway, the social events of the day were only beginning at that point. Mikko had barely started rambling about coffee when someone else showed up. You guessed it, it was her. She waltzed in with her unshakable stern air and asked for directions in the most polite way I had ever heard. But when we turned to her, all we could do was stare. It was our first time ever seeing a Broken, you know. They weren't a common sight back then. She waited patiently.

Mikko got a hold of himself first. "I'm sorry, what did you say you were looking for?"

"I'm on my way northward and I'm looking for supplies."

She had the softest voice, and when Mikko restarted his rant on coffee we all got back to our senses.

“We're all kinda looking for supplies right now,” Em said.

“We could search together! Hey, what's your name?”

I shook my head at my brother's freshly regained childish enthusiasm, but the woman smiled, as much as she could I guess.

“You can just call me Savolainen,” she said.

“But that's not your name, is it?” I chimed in, wary.

Savolainen kept smiling as she answered, “It's a name I like, and the one I chose. No one's going to ask for my ID now, right?”

I had to admit she was right, and Atte went back to asking her a thousand questions.

Not for long, though, because the bus arrived after that. We watched this tall, long-haired guy jump out with relief on his face and call, “Em!”

“Jukka?”

Em hesitated for a split second before running into Jukka's arms. It was the first time I ever saw her smile, I remember it clearly. They held each other for a long time, whispering and laughing. Then Em introduced us, and the team was complete.

Our great adventure was about to begin. But at the time I don't think any of us was ready for what would be coming next.

VII. Em

Savolainen told us everything right away, explaining that her situation was no excuse to become a liar and a betrayer. She told us about the clinic where greedy scientists had experimented on her, and how she had become immune to the Disease. She also recounted how she had felt the first time she realized that because of what she looked like now she would never be able to go outside and live her life again. She spoke with no expression on her face, but the emotion in her voice was obvious. She then talked about where she was headed and what her plans were, openly recognizing that she had no interest in being the hero of a world that would never accept her. I understood that. When I looked to the others, I saw that the twins were a bit shocked. So I answered first, and told Savolainen that her life was hers to live and that she didn't owe anyone anything.

“I'll help you out,” I said. I glanced up at Jukka, who smiled faintly and nodded. “*We* will,” I continued. “It's the end of the world and I've always wanted to go around the country to see

everything. Now or never, right?"

"We can take the bus," Jukka added. "My bandmates are done with it, so we might as well use it."

"I'll come with you too," Mikko said. "Helping someone be free seems like a worthy goal. Also I'll surely find some coffee on the way. It can't be *all* gone."

That made us chuckle, but the twins were still silent.

Savolainen was about to speak again when Atte suddenly blurted out, "We'll come as well. I mean, right?" He turned to his sister, who frowned. She explained to me later on that she had never been this conflicted in her life. She liked Savolainen, but she was having a hard time accepting that she would be helping the only one able to heal everyone else escape from her responsibilities. Atte could probably feel this through some sort of twin magic, so he said, "She just wants to be allowed to live, sis, like all of us. Who are we to tell her what to do?"

Aina eventually agreed, albeit reluctantly. Savolainen thanked us, visibly touched, and before long we were in the tour bus ready to make our way to Oulu.

We sped through, only briefly stopping in Iisalmi to check out a store. Mikko lost his mind at the lack of coffee but Atte grabbed a bunch of cocoa powder with the biggest smile on his face, and that seemed to calm him down. We were deep into the night when that happened, so there's not much I can tell you about Iisalmi. I should go back one day, see what it's like.

We reached Oulu as the sun was still rising, and the view was both impressive and depressing. Thousands of Diseased swarming from everywhere, a seemingly endless horde roaming the ravaged streets of a once beautiful city. Jukka had a friend who lived there, so seeing that shook him more than the rest of us. Seeing *him* like that shook me, but I didn't let it show.

"Where's the biggest store?" Savolainen asked as she slowed the bus. "We can't linger here so let's make our only stop count."

Atte looked at his phone then guided us to our one chance of loading up on supplies before Rovaniemi. When we arrived the place seemed to have been hastily barricaded, which made Jukka grunt.

"I've seen that before," he explained. "There's probably people in there, and not the good kind."

"Let's split up in groups of two to cover more ground," Savolainen declared. "Hurry up, grab what we can and run back. Meet up here in ten minutes, not a second more, then we're out."

Atte and Aina were tasked with the meals while Mikko and Savolainen would be looking for hygiene products. Jukka being the strongest of us, he and I had to take care of the water.

As you can imagine, we ran into trouble almost as soon as we split the party. From the stories we recounted afterwards in the bus, I can tell you that we were attacked by seven scavengers. The twins got three, but their sport's-equipment-turned-bludgeoning-weapons made quick work of them in the dried food lane, and they came back pretty bloody. Savolainen and Mikko operate at long range, so their fight wasn't even fair. Just our luck, though, because we really needed that refill of toilet paper. Jukka and I fought our own two goons amidst plastic bottles. My kulta didn't want to waste water, so he refrained from using his shotgun in the lane and bashed the head of one of them with a pack of six litres. I would have laughed at that if I hadn't been busy running one of my knives through the other scavenger's neck. Long story short, things got messy but we managed to secure enough supplies to last us a while.

We left Oulu as fast as we entered it, heading ever northward on our way to Rovaniemi.

We drove for a short while then elected to take a break in Kemi for a much needed cleanup. Our clothes were in dire need of help, and so were our faces, honestly. I can't recall who came up with the brilliant idea of staying where they made the snow castle thing, but I'll love them forever. We had such a blast there, it felt as if the world around us didn't exist anymore. We spent the day scouring the empty souvenir shops to make stupid jokes. We slept in the snow hotel, which was amazing even though the power was out and it wasn't cold at all, just because of how peaceful and beautiful it was. That night was definitely one of the best I've ever had, despite the circumstances. We left in the morning, rested and refreshed.

Now that we've established that we were all big dumb children, I think you can guess where exactly in Rovaniemi we were headed to. Damn right we were gonna check out what had happened in Santa's Village! Also we were in autumn, so it felt like a good idea to go where there would have been the least amount of people. To avoid another Oulu, you know. But what we saw there was something we hadn't expected to ever see, that's for sure.

Upon reaching the gate, we were welcomed by two of Santa's helpers wielding hunting rifles. They were pretty wary at first, but once they understood that we weren't scavengers they relaxed and let us in with their usual big smiles. Surprisingly, Santa's village looked exactly the same as it did before the Disease broke out. The helpers explained that a few of them, including our very own Joulupukki, had decided to remain there to keep the place safe no matter what. Those folks were die-hard Xmas fans, let me tell you.

While Mikko and Atte disappeared in direction of Santapark, the rest of us hung out in the village and met with Santa. The others kept it cool, but I was really into it. It was my first time there, but I had wanted to visit ever since I moved to Finland. When I told Jukka, he thought it was cute and got me a stuffed reindeer as a souvenir. We return to Santa's village every year now. Anyways. Eventually our two lovebirds returned from the amusement park, and the Xmas crew was more than happy to provide us with some extra supplies before we left.

Our journey had been much nicer than we originally thought it would be, for sure. We had no idea that the worst was actually behind us, and that some of our most amazing moments awaited us further up into Lappland.

VIII. Savolainen

The closer we got from the border, the more homesick I felt. It was a weird kind of feeling, I guess. So I made us take more pit stops than we really needed, yes, but a lot of great things happened thanks to that and I regret nothing. This far up North there were less Diseased, too, so we could actually enjoy our breaks. I had to keep my hood up and my head down when people were around, but I didn't mind. I knew all that would be behind me soon enough.

The first of our best Lappland moments happened in Sodankylä, where we were surprised to find an open restaurant. The lights were on and it had a cook inside, as if everything was perfectly normal. Well, it had no staff and no customers, but other than that it was just fine. It was pretty stylish, even, with its old movie posters on the walls. We took our seats and ordered. The cook looked overjoyed, and I swear their pasta is the best thing I've ever eaten in my life. We all had a good time relaxing and talking and laughing. An evening to remember, for sure.

Next we stopped in Tankavaara, home of the prospectors. It felt like walking onto a movie set. It was completely abandoned, which gave it an incredibly eerie aura. We took a break from our travels there, and followed a trail to a small hill overlooking the Sompio reserve. The view was stunning. We stood there all together in silence for a long time. When the sun began to set and we realized we had been there for hours, we reluctantly tore our eyes away from Sompio and returned to the bus.

You won't believe what I'm about to tell you. When we halted in Ivalo, we raided an abandoned café located inside the supermarket and we actually found coffee there. And the good pricey kind, to

boot. Mikko's eyes filled with tears as he dropped to his knees and thanked the gods for their mercy, swearing eternal fealty to them. Well, that's not *exactly* what happened, but I'm sure that's how the kid felt inside, and really it's the version you should remember. In reality he hugged the packets and swore a lot. Not glorious. But after that he spent the rest of the trip constantly sipping on coffee, and it made him less agitated. One day Em commented on how the way he handled caffeine was the opposite of everybody else's. She looked kind of impressed, which I found hilarious.

Mikko replied by saying, "You're always someone else's monster."

I carry these words with me ever since.

Our time in Inari felt a lot like a school's field trip. Atte and Aina, our students fond of culture, dragged us all around town to visit the Siida and the Sajos. We learned many things about the sámi, most of which I have forgotten long ago. Sorry, I'm an old hag who's never been very studious. Guilty as charged. But I remember the beautiful art and passionate people we saw there. I found it all heartwarming, though I'm not quite sure why. I even bought a nice handmade mug I still use everyday. Jukka got Em an ornate knife, too. It was adorable.

After the twins' hunger for folk knowledge had been satiated, we went for a picnic on the shore of lake Inari. I knew that this would be the last peaceful moment we would share in Finland. I felt both sad and excited, like a kid leaving home for the first time.

Karigasniemi and its one and only store were our last stop before crossing the border into Norway. While the others were gathering supplies, I stood facing the Teno river, coldly staring down its water. It was an end, but also a beginning. A few more hours of travel past this line and I would be free.

After a while I felt a hand on my shoulder, and Aina's voice asked me if I was okay. I nodded, but to this day I'm not quite sure how I felt at the time. I regained the bus and drove away.

That night, without ceremony, I left my home behind me.

IX. Mikko

The shore near Lakselv was devoid of everything but the small boat that lay waiting for Savolainen.

We all handled the perspective of parting ways differently, especially those of us still struggling to figure out what they would do next.

Em and Jukka were masters at hiding their emotions, so no one could really tell what they had in mind as they stood side by side holding hands tightly.

Savolainen wore a smile. A sad smile, but a smile nonetheless. She was a bit conflicted, I guess.

Aina looked displeased and uneasy, her arms folded across her chest. Not only was she saying goodbye to a friend, she also had no plans for the future. She was a free spirit who valued independence over all else, and as much as she loved her brother she wasn't going to spend her life looking after him.

Atte kept glancing over at me with his sad puppy eyes, and I kept nodding back to tell him everything was going to be alright. We were going to stay together now, maybe return to Kuopio like Em and Jukka were planning to do.

Savolainen said goodbye to each of us personally, thanking us for our help and what we had taught her. She said to me, “Thanks for showing me that not all scientist a greedy shits.” Then she put her bag in my arms and added, “I want you to take care of it. *You*. I know *you*'ll do the right thing.” She sighed and gave me a nod as she took a step back. “Open that when I'm out of sight, yeah?”

Savolainen repeated her farewell to all of us with the same sad smile she had been wearing earlier, then she jumped onto the boat and left. We watched her quietly until she disappeared into the horizon. We stood there aimless for a long time.

After a while, I opened up Savolainen's bag and peeked inside. Enough blood and other various organic samples to work on a cure. No wonder that damn bag was so heavy.

Without a word I showed the samples to the others. I didn't even need to explain what it was for. A smile formed on Aina's face as she breathed, “I knew it.”

“You're gonna do it, right?” Atte asked earnestly.

“Of course I am,” I said. “There's a very nice lab at the University of Savo that's currently empty. Might as well make use of it. Wouldn't want it to go to waste.”

We all rushed back to Kuopio together. Aina continued on to Helsinki to look for the clinic while I locked myself up with the four best lab assistants a scientist could ever hope for. Between my work and the informations Aina managed to find, we synthesized the very first batch of the cure. Then I guess the rest is History.

We couldn't save everyone, but we did the best we could. All of us. Especially Savolainen. I just hope that's what people will remember. You know, I found a letter from her in the bag along with the samples. I read it often, and maybe you should too.

It's a good reminder of how all that truly matters is inside, and of how foolish we were back in the days when we all gave appearances way too much importance.

I hope I'll be able to see her again someday.

X. Savolainen's Letter

Dear Mikko (and everyone else in the crew),

Thank you for carrying me this far. I used to think my face would condemn me to eternal loneliness, but you proved me wrong. For that, perhaps more than for anything else, I will be forever grateful to you. You ridiculously wonderful people. I hate having to leave you and our home, but you know I have to go. As strong as I try to make myself look, I'm also lucid enough to know I couldn't live like this. Locked up. Shunned. Maybe even feared. So I'll be lonely by choice, I guess. At least I'm not angry anymore, thanks to you.

I hope you will find the contents of my bag useful, whether you choose to use it only for you or for everybody. I can't really judge you, can I? In any case, send me a note to let me know how you're doing every now and then, yeah?

And if you encounter someone like me, which is very likely to happen if you decide to make a cure, please tell them that they are not a monster. If ever society still rejects them, send them to me. We'll build a new home just for us. But if somehow society has finally evolved enough to focus on the right things... please send word to me. You never know, I might want to come back. We'll see. It's all up to you now, anyway.

Do make sure you go ahead and live a happy life.

Your friend forever,

Savolainen