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Honorable Mention

Silicon Fox

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SUMMARY *"Silicon Fox" is a work of speculative fiction derived from fieldwork research in the emerging Icelandic and North American data storage industry. The story narrativizes the anxieties and hopes of people in the cloud infrastructure sector in Iceland and investors in North America. This work of fiction is a meditation on the future promise and peril of Iceland as a hub for cloud computing and data storage in the near future. The scenarios, settings, and characters depicted are fabrications based in part on interview data and ethnographic field notes. Given the salience and widespread appeal of the murder mystery genre in Iceland, the story takes on this meta-frame and relies on it to showcase the moral anxieties and dilemmas of Icelanders as they speculate on what challenges the future may bring for Iceland if it becomes a data hub.*

[anthropocene, data centers, anthropology of computing, Iceland, speculative fiction]

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JUNE

Amid crags encrusted with golden moss, the fog seeps, scattering the glow of the midnight sun in the hues of Reykjavík roses as they first bloom. Inspector Óðinn Rós Thorsson scans the mist for signs of life but finds only anthropoid phantoms lurking in the silhouettes of the lava fields. Specters of his childhood materialize from the roiling moisture, mirages, glimpses of *huldufólk*—those hidden beings his mother had once said lurked in the most desolate corners of Icelandic wilderness. Óðinn sighs. It pleases him to indulge in fantasy, in nostalgia, as he knows that such superstitions are vanishing comforts, as are those simpler days when Icelanders still looked upon the boundless wilderness with awe and veneration. As a child his eyes might have transformed the mossy rocks into the frenzied shapes of trolls in suspended animation, reeling as the sun petrified them limb by hirsute limb. Now, peering out at the expanse of those igneous minarets, Óðinn envisions printed skyscrapers in place of clawing trolls.

Where once dwelt the *huldufólk* and the numinous deities of the Norse pantheon, now rise the plasteel heights of data poleis, prefabricated off-shore, drop-shipped in three-dimensional printed modules, and stitched together to meet the demands of a global data storage industry and its foreign workers. The Ísland of trolls is receding; in its place, the island is swiftly becoming computation's natural habitat. The world's data storage hub, or as some of his disaffected neighbors characterize it, the world's data "dump." Iceland's natural resources—the might of its waterfalls, the ardor of the magma bubbling beneath its fractured surface, the titanic crawl of its glaciers, are now commodities tapped to keep the Cloud afloat, to keep the fires of silicon industry cool. Few predicted how much power and real estate ubiquitous computation would require. Machine learning engines. Simulated worlds and realities. Digital mirrors—those living replicas of persons immortalized in hard disks. All stored here, in his backyard. "This is what we have become," Óðinn mutters to himself as he searches the perimeter of the lava field for clandestine signs that only a seasoned detective can discern.

Inspector Thorsson reminds himself he is not here to muse about the past, but instead, to determine what transpired in this place over the last twenty-four hours. The omni-camera in his SEAX drone chimes irreverently, having completed Óðinn's request for a 360-degree holograph of the scene. Like a pair of macabre archaeologists, Óðinn and his mechanical companion document every detail of the environment; soil composition, depositional provenience, topography, and most crucially, the positioning of the body, which lays in a contorted wreck of limbs unnaturally splayed. The victim's legs are buckled and folded at the knees, well beyond the natural range of motion, no doubt fractured by the impact of her fall from the highest point in the ravine. Her cold, azure eyes remain lurched open, frost encrusting the spheres of her bare irises. No traces of digital lenses are present in those sterile orbs. Óðinn gawks at the violence with which her bones had evidently shattered, imagining that like her broken body, her spirit, too, had been riven asunder.

Elín Guðnadóttir. Activist and staunch critic of the emerging data storage industry. Last month, he recalls, she famously vowed to throw herself from Glymur, Iceland's tallest waterfall, as an act of protest for GreenCloud's pursuit of a construction contract in the yet untouched Snæfellsnes peninsula, one of Iceland's last unspoiled natural wonders. With yesterday's signing of the contract and public endorsement from the Prime Minister's office at Alþingi, it seems, Elín made good on her threat, albeit in a different location than promised. No one expected her to follow through, but when she went missing, Óðinn, taking her vow of political suicide seriously, decided to track her digital scent to this foreboding expanse of lava fields along Iceland's southern coast.

Whirring just over his shoulder, his digital bloodhound and mechanical assistant, Rex, had triangulated this position based on her last known digital activities, including her discarded lenses, which they found nearby Iceland's printed superhighway along the Southern Coast. Just yesterday, Óðinn's colleagues were scoffing at the idea that Elín's disappearance was a matter of concern, citing her

troubled history of goading law enforcement for political gain. But Óðinn knows better. He is, after all, a detective, and his nose is honed to the scent of blood. Blood courses with memory, it stains the sagas of its flows on the surfaces it touches. His father never flinched at the sight of blood. Every year, young Óðinn watching, learning, he set about humanely slaughtering the plumpest ewe in the spring time, for its prized mutton or to make a hearty lamb stew. This story, and stories just like it, once defined what it meant to be Icelandic, what it meant to have Icelandic blood. These days, however, nationalism is dwindling, as most residents of the island are foreign-born and foreign-bred. “We traded sheep farms for server farms,” Óðinn whispers to himself, swabbing the droplets of blood congealed like frost on the moss bed that serves as Elín’s tomb.

“Rex, resolve the fall trajectory scenarios with the tele-medical assessment,” Óðinn commands, leaning closer to the body, trying not to lock eyes with the corpse.

In peering away from those lifeless orbs of glacial-blue ice, he notices a splotch of violet on her skin, the same hue as lupine flowers. Like the server farm, the lupine is a foreign transplant. While a tourist might look upon the colorful, wispy petals with adoration, Icelanders like Óðinn find them to be a repulsive emblem of the alien—a monstrous other that ravages natural beauty. Like the servers, the lupines are a necessary evil, considering the rapid pace of desertification encroaching on already diminishing farmland. *Terraforming*. It was not unlike the decimation of the forests that his Nordic ancestors had once wrought. *How many times have we transformed this place?* Servers are saving the economy, he reminds himself, but at what cost? Óðinn snaps a two-dimensional photograph with his handheld camera. He magnifies the image to focus on the discolored lupine patch on the victim’s throat and begins to surmise an explanation.

“All proposed fall trajectories fall short of explaining the full extent of injuries exhibited,” Rex babbles, in that haughty London basso that Silicon Valley designed him with per Óðinn’s request.

"The neck bruising?" Óðinn guesses, crossing his arms.

"It appears that based on the platelet concentration from the sample, the bruising occurred hours before the fall." Rex continues, shifting to Óðinn's left flank.

Hours before the fall. Óðinn scratches his head, noticing another splotch just below her collar bone. *Asphyxiation. Not strangulation, but asphyxiation. Smothered, perhaps?* He doesn't need Rex to verify what his trained eyes are attuned to seeing. Elín Guðnadóttir, the crackpot nationalist and laughingstock of the media derided on every news station, was murdered, but why?

AUGUST

Óðinn doesn't flinch when the pickup truck begins to heave and rattle as it bounds up the gravel road. He brings the vehicle to a halt at the end of the dusty track with a chuckle, recalling how the Captain once remarked that she kept the road to her home unpaved to keep American tourists out. The door lurches open with the easterly wind, moistening his face with notes of sweet brine. Rex descends from the heavens, settling just above Óðinn's shoulder, the whirring of his propellers almost inaudible against the din of the roaring sea. They make their way to the Captain's cottage, a pale-yellow shack perched at the edge of the escarpment, the sheer expanse of Hvalfjörður below, obscured by pillars of undulating fog. Óðinn shakes a recollection of the first time he came to the fjords as a child. He had imagined that a blue whale might be large enough to fill the entire inlet, that it might emerge from the shroud to greet him. These days, it is said to be good luck if any kind of whale makes it this far inland. Most of the skippers he knows are retiring, their generations of proud industry no longer profitable because the fish are leaving. He has a few friends who still go out into the bay.

Sometimes he imagines them, stoic, alone in the mist, chasing ghosts, phantom game beneath dead waves. They cling to purpose, even as they toil in futility. There is honor in facing the insurmountable. The seas are running hotter and no one can stop it.

"Sir," Rex chimes, in that pedantic tone that makes Oðinn pre-emptively shake his head in annoyance. "If I may."

"You may not," Oðinn says, suppressing a chuckle. "You know that I am stubborn."

"Unfortunately, I do," Rex sighs, his retinal display brightening and then dimming, as if mimicking an eye roll. "Well, all I have to say is ... I'm with you. No matter what."

"Good, because I hear the Captain's girls are in need of a Nanny."

"I would not entrust myself with their care."

"I thought you always wanted kids?"

"I can barely take care of you."

They enter the house, Oðinn cursing when the door slams.

"Not to worry, the hinges need oiling," the Captain says in that high-pitched voice that doesn't seem congruent with her hulking frame. Oðinn takes a seat in his usual spot in the kitchen on the chrome bar stool, and the Captain emerges from the hall, a pot of coffee in her hand. She fills three mugs out of habit, scoffing when Rex reminds her that he no longer possesses a small intestine or blood vessels to benefit from caffeine intake.

"Will you drink his coffee then, too?" the Captain says, the snowy puff of hair on her almost naked scalp especially awry. They laugh together now as they did back then, Rex joining in, his voice eerily resonant and modulated.

Oðinn pushes the coffee aside, "Why did you reassign my case?" He peers into the Captain's eyes, the gray in her irises appearing to grow grayer, like the vortex gathering in the sky over the fjord.

"You know as well as I do that it is for the best," the Captain manages, between loud slurps of black coffee.

"So what do you want me to do now, hunt down Americans taking illegal shits on our hiking trails?" Odinn crosses his arms, "A girl was murdered."

The Captain's eyebrows furl into a wad of snow, "A girl committed suicide."

"I know you don't think I can handle it," Odinn says. "That I'm too close—that it's too personal," Odinn takes a big swig of the coffee. "This has the fingerprints of the Cryptobaron's all over it and you know it."

The Captain sighs, "You remember what happened the last time you decided to chase an arctic Fox." She sets her mug down, her eyes studying the SEAX bobbing above them. "The Barons are dangerous."

"My partner ended up in pieces, all over the Reykjanes."

Rex buzzes in, "At least the gulls were happy."

The Captain shakes her head, "And there was nothing we could do about it. And if you're right, they'll be nothing to be done about whatever they end up doing to you."

Rex chimes in, "It is rude to talk about someone in the third person when they are present."

The Captain raises her left eyebrow, "What in the blazes possessed you to program your SEAX with *his* mirror?"

Odinn smiles, "It was a pact Rex and I made once in jest. I thought I would follow through. If things turned out differently, and they got me instead of him, I would be the one hovering over his shoulder."

The Captain works to suppress a grin, "If your hunch is true, we lack the resources, the personnel to pursue this."

"And what of the Barons then, what of the United Nations' most wanted?" Odinn says with a shrug. "Is it not our duty to make Icelandic data safe and secure for all?"

The Captain drinks from Rex's coffee cup, "You sound like the Prime Minister."

The drone hovers between them, lighting up, the Prime Minister's voice perfectly reproduced from an old televised recording, "It is with great regret that I approve this cloud infrastructure merger contract. Iceland has always owned its natural resources, and perhaps someday we will regain the good will to continue that tradition. But for now, we must permit this. We must uphold the United Nations regulation of cryptocurrency. And we cannot put a stop to the theft, sabotage, and destruction caused by these crypto criminals without help from abroad. We are too small to stand alone."

Odinn waves a hand at Rex, "That's quite enough history for today, old friend."

The Captain shrugs, "And they call him a sell-out. In the end, he made a good call. GreenCloud has managed to keep things going for everyone. The breaches are fewer and fewer every year, perhaps the Barons really have gone dark."

Odinn's lips crease into a frown, "Or they want to appear that way."

The Captain fiddles with the sparse strands of her bangs, "I'll give you three months. Off the record. No press." She puts the mugs in the sink, "And if you find nothing but ghosts."

Rex buzzes, "Sometimes the living take the shape of ghosts."

Odinn nods for a moment, "Goo on, show her what you showed me."

OCTOBER

The elevator is silent as Odinn Rós ascends to the top floor of the modular housing tower. Below him, an alien city, carved from plasteel in gleaming spikes rises like the parapets of a medieval castle. The mountains remind him that this vista is unnatural. Where the towers stand and where the server grids rise there once dwelt a mighty glacier, now receded. The greening of the Cloud came too late. The door springs silently open as Odinn and his lightly buzzing automaton sidekick approach the apartment, room 1801. His knock is even but pointed.

A young woman answers the door, her silver-dyed hair fluttering in the wan sunlight. "You must be Inspector Thorsson. The one who doesn't give up."

"Odinn," he says shaking her hand. "This is Rex," he says, pointing to the SEAX drone.

Her steel-blue eyes are uncannily familiar—he tries not to see Elín's frosted gaze in them.

"Pora, I want to ask ..."

She crosses her arms and faces the window, where a bone-white glacial tongue, serrated with sediment, is cresting the ridge of the valley. "My sister is gone. It's what she wanted. I don't see the point of this."

"Pora, I know you helped her."

"I don't know what you are talking about," she says, fidgeting.

"Look, I get it. You work for GreenCloud, she worked against it. Your relationship wasn't the best. But what if I told you ... what if I told you that she may have been murdered."

Pora turns to face him, looking past the drone who was scanning the room.

"Murdered? Why am I just hearing about this now? It's been three months."

Odinn scratches the grey-brown stubble on his jaw line, "Given the high-profile nature of the case, I decided to withhold this development from the press, for now. I don't want our suspects alerted to our progress."

Pora frowns, "Am I a suspect?"

"No, but you are more implicated than you realize," Odinn says, handing her a glass box, inside are two lenses. "Four months ago, you reported your lenses stolen. You misplaced them and thought nothing of it."

Pora sighs, "Where?"

"Several kilometers from where we found her. I believe she discarded them there deliberately so that we could find her. She reprogrammed them to emit both of your

tracking signatures. Whoever is behind this had no idea we would be able to track her there. We found hers deactivated in your family's farmhouse."

"I think I know why," Pora begins, "She asked for my help, she wanted some data on GreenCloud, it was all public information, related to accounting—ledgers, stuff of that sort. It was much easier for me to get as an employee with facilities access. Otherwise she would have had to wait months for a freedom of information request. But it was a trick," Pora shakes her head. "We may be nothing alike, but we are twins, and in some ways we *are* identical. I know how she thinks. She must have replayed the retinal footage to learn my passcodes and ciphers. She must have been after something bigger."

Pora reaches for something under her bed, a chest, inside a letter, handwritten.

"One day you will see me for who I am," Rex reads aloud in his London basso.

"Rex, scan the letter thoroughly," Oðinn commands. "When did she send this?"

Pora gasps, "Just a few days before she ... we fought the last time she was here. I told her to grow up and embrace the future, she told me I was blind and to fuck off."

Rex chimes with recognition. "There is an augmented reality interface chip woven into the paper. Access Denied."

"The lenses," Oðinn says pointing to the glass case.

Pora puts them on hastily, Rex syncing her display to the holoprojector in the room. A series of translucent ledger files and recording feeds beam into view.

"Rex, analysis," Oðinn says.

Pora squints as she surveys the documents, "She somehow acquired all of the private ledgers. She must have hacked their administrative servers. Maybe she entered the facility, pretending to be me. It wouldn't have been difficult to do with my lenses."

Rex reports in his monotone, "These financials indicate that GreenCloud is funneling money for the Cryptobarons in exchange ..."

Pora crosses her arms, "Inspector. They're bidding for public lands using cryptocriminals as brokers. They've been expanding illegally from the beginning. It appears the security crisis was manufactured to wrest lands from public control. It goes all the way to the top." Pora combs her silver hair through her pale hands, "All this time I was fighting her, and she was the one who was right."

Odinn paces in silence, gazing at the printed urban sprawl below. "I need you to tell me everything you know about the Himinn data facility, how it works, who does what."

Pora nods, her face flush with color, "Perhaps I should start with the floor plans."

Rex projects a holograph of the facility blueprint into the room.

Pora shakes her head, "They say losing your twin is like losing half of yourself."

Odinn gestures to his SEAX, "I lost my other half once. It nearly broke me. But now, now we have the chance to make things right."

Pora eyes the SEAX thoroughly, her eyes welling with tears, perhaps a glimmer of understanding.

Odinn places a hand on Pora's shoulder. "I'm going to get them, all of them. For Elín. For Rex. We owe it to them. But we must wait a few months, we must build a whole case and strike when the moment is right. This is an international matter now."

DECEMBER

The air is chill inside GreenCloud's premiere data center, Himinn. Inspector Odinn Rós, escorted by the company's VP of Development, Jane Sawyer, marches past blinking racks of ultra-density computer servers, straining to hear amid the roar of fans what his tour guide is saying.

"Where is everyone today?" Odinn says, nearly shouting.

"It's the weekend before Christmas so we're down to a skeleton crew. Besides, you really don't need a lot of people to run servers these days," she says, nearly tripping over a loose cable. "We've never been more efficient."

"What's this?" Odinn asks, gesturing to a gigantic glass container, filled with opposing racks of servers.

"Oh, that fossil? It is what we call a containment aisle," Jane says, pointing to the top of the greenhouse-like chamber, where pipes are snaking up into the ceiling, presumably out to the atmosphere.

"May I see inside?" Odinn says, his face contorting.

"Certainly," she says as she approaches the glass box. "It's an older model for efficient ventilation invented in the 2000s. Not very elegant, but we keep this antique setup around to remind us of how things have progressed," Jane says, opening the plexiglass door with a seamless retinal scan.

Odinn paces around the glass box like an anxious zoo animal, "So how does it work?"

Jane points to the perforations in the corrugated floor tiles beneath their feet, the black twists of her hair swaying with the flow of air. "It's basically a pressure engine. The fans in the servers here draw in the cold, pressurized air from the chamber beneath the tiles—it's kind of like drinking through a straw."

"So, is it possible to have an imbalanced pressure situation?"

"In the olden days, it was a common problem. Too much pressure or too little. Negative or positive flow taxes the servers, and many people didn't realize how it was impacting their functioning long-term. But our methods today are much better," Jane says, her sepia face saturated with fluorescent light.

Odinn folds his arms and says, "Interesting."

Jane rests her hand on the server grate, "Is there anything else I can help you with Mr. Thorsson?"

Oðinn's eyes narrow, "So that is how you did it."

Jane's brows furrow, "What?"

"You're under arrest, Mrs. Sawyer," Oðinn says, unlocking a pair of smart cuffs.

Jane's eyes widen, "Excuse me?"

"For the murder of Elín Guðnadóttir," Oðinn says, approaching her. "You lured her here, promising to negotiate, and turned this containment aisle into a death trap."

"Mr. Thorsson, do you know how ridiculous you sound?"

"Elín outsmarted you, the data is backed up, and I have all the evidence I need to prosecute you and everyone at GreenCloud involved."

"Mr. Thorsson, you have no idea who you are fucking with," Jane warns, her voice a tremulous rasp.

"You're going to prison, GreenCloud is finished. The Icelandic government will be seizing every asset tied to these crimes. Your cryptos, your data centers, your real estate. All of it gone."

"You can't do this."

"Yes we can, Jane," Oðinn places the cuffs around her wrists. The crypto-algorithm chimes as the cuffs snap into place, only unsealable with a court cipher. "And it's Oðinn, not Mr. Thorsson. Here in Iceland, everyone is equal."

Jane lurches backward, the cuffs limiting her range of motion, but giving her enough freedom of movement to reach the container exit. Before Oðinn can follow suit, the door slams shut, sealed by her retinal authorization.

"If the pressure is negative enough, no oxygen will flow through the chamber. And anyone so unfortunate as to be trapped inside will not survive to tell about it," Jane says, fidgeting with the console. "We'll discredit your data, wipe all trace of what you hope to prove—make it all go away. We did it before with your partner and we'll do it again with you!" she shouts.

The fans whirl with even greater intensity and cacophony as the shudder panels on critical ingress and egress apertures close shut. Odinn becomes conscious of his breath shortening.

Jane laughs, "You really thought your people could be the stewards of the future? Fishermen. Farmers. Shepherders. If it wasn't for us Americans, this place would be a backwater shithole. We made you what you are."

Odinn begins to wheeze. His veins bulge and writhe along his neck like vipers coiling greedily around prey. He tries not to imagine Elín, here, dying like this in her final moments. Instead he tries to remember Rex, the real Rex, the last day he saw him, his golden hair and that piercing, comical smile. "You always had the last laugh," Odinn mutters.

Jane's eyes narrow, "Sixty seconds, by my calculation, before you pass out and go limp. Oh, and if you think your pet is going to save you, I magnetized the bins in the security checkpoint. He's toast."

Odinn falls to his knees, clutching his neck, his gaze defiant as he looks at Jane, "You are wrong about us."

Odinn rises from the floor, color returning to his face, "And you are wrong about Rex." The fire alarms go off one by one. The ventilation cage opens. Water pummels from the sprinkler system above. The door opens, Odinn leaps out, bolting after Jane who is at a full sprint, running through the pearly labyrinth of server racks toward the nearest exit. She opens the door with her back facing the exit, Odinn closing in, only to find the Captain waiting for her, and a hovering SEAX drone above her.

"That wasn't Rex," Odinn says with smile.

"It was actually a decoy. A smoke emitter. Just enough to set off the alarms when the time was right," Rex chimes from behind. Jane collapses to the ground in resignation.

The Captain's white bangs flutter in the wind, "You're going to give us all the names of the Barons, or we will extradite, and as you know American justice is much crueler than our own." The Captain shoots a glance at Odinn, "'t seems you caught your silicon fox at last."

Odinn kneels to peer into Jane's smoldering eyes, "Thanks to you, a new Iceland is coming, one that will not take too kindly to guests who overstay their welcome."