The Champion's Journey

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Egil Brekke, the famous athlete, has more than one skeleton in his closet. He's the biathlon world's crowned king - but life is about more than winning races. As Egil's career goes up, his confidence starts to ebb away. Does he have more to offer the world than a pair of good lungs and a steady hand? Egil isn't so sure about it...

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"We should be able to see them coming out of the fog by now," the speaker said into his microphone, "So, where are our two combatants?"

The white vapor rested like a dense blanket over the entire arena, making the thousands of human beings who were waiting by the track's finishing line, standing squeezed together on a terrace, completely quiet. Every single one of the people in the crowd held their breaths as they knew that the conclusion of the great contest would be over in a short period of time.

Would Germany's own favorite athlete, Robin Beckenbauer, get to win his first golden medal on home grounds, or would the Norwegian lightning bolt once again snatch it right before his eyes?

As they had passed the final checkpoint, Beckenbauer had had a ten second advantage over the Norwegian star, but would that be enough? Sure, the German was in good shape, but everyone knew that no one had defeated the Norwegian star in a sprint to the finishing line. Especially not if there was gold in sight.

Soon, you could see the dark shadow of a man breaking through the whiteness of the vapor. A deafening roar was released from the crowd as they could make out the yellow and black colors of Robin Beckenbauer's tight suit. They cheered and threw their hats into the air, hugging each other in a state of bliss. The gold was secured! He had managed to defeat the red lightning bolt! There was no end to the happiness of the German audience as they prepared themselves to sing the national anthem and readied their phones to post Facebook updates about the amazing victory.

"It seems like Beckenbauer had a really good breakfast this morning; he's basically skiing on clouds!" the speaker screamed.

That was when another shadow arose from the fog, as well.

The crowd grew quiet for a split second, exchanging concerned looks. Then a man started screaming and all of the other ones followed his example, only that this time around, the shrill cry was one of panic, and not ecstasy.

The speaker started jumping up and down while flailing his arms. "Look! Brekke is closing in on Beckenbauer!"

Robin Beckenbauer, who had been wearing a smile on his sweaty face, took a quick look over his shoulder and his heart instantly stopped beating. He had thought that the gold was already in his hand and that his journey towards the finishing line would be a jolly walk in the park; now he had to set his mind on a completely different kind of scenery. This was going to be nothing but an energy-draining battle to the last millesimal of a second, if he knew his opponent right.

He ordered his legs to start working on a faster frequency; but they stubbornly refused to obey his command. The lactic acids had taken over. Robin cursed himself for not listening properly to his mother as she used to tell him to never count the chickens before they had hatched.

The short distance to the finishing line betrayed its fellow-citizen.

Egil Brekke knew that he could easily take the German athlete down in a sprint, that is if he could milk the precious final ounces of reserved carbs stored in his body and turn it into energy. His body screamed for him

to stop, but his brain refused to be a loser. No one ever remembered the man with the silver medal, ever.

He started pushing his body to the absolute limit;ï¿½nearly skipping forward like a rabbit on his pair of skis. The snow was compact, almost crisp; the functionaries had poured bags of salt on the track. It was a couple of degrees warm and the salt was needed to make the snow stick together and not form a snow-swamp for the contestants to swim through.

Robin Beckenbauer could almost feel Egil's heavy breathing against the skin of his neck as he could see the red finishing line more clearly. The line was a simple straight line drawn in the snow from one commercial post to the other. His team was there, cheering for him and screaming so that their voices would be gone the following morning. He couldn't let them down; he had to fight furiously against the living machine who was trying to eat him alive. This was his moment to shine bright like all of his idols had in the past.

"Egil and Robin are fighting side by side!" the speaker screeched and his eyes rolled around in their sockets.

Egil had managed to somehow push his body next to Robin's, and as they approached the line - he had the advantage. Surely, it wasn't a big one but it was enough for him. Egil pressed all of his weight onto his two skis while using his ski poles to push himself forward. The muscles of his tense torso contracted as he took one final stride to end the race.

He glided over the line and everything was quiet except for the speaker's constant ranting. The crowd was disappointed and they all agreed that Robin deserved the place in the spotlight more. The Norwegian had already had his fair share of starlight and fame.

"And Egil Brekke has done it again, ladies and gentlemen! He has claimed his eleventh medal this season - is there no stop to this man?"

Egil fell to his knees, the drool and snot was mixed together in a cocktail of victory on his chin. Everything was spinning. His lungs and muscles were all cramping and the loud beating of his own heart sounded like gun-shots in his ears. And then, before he had even had time to catch his breath, there was a camera and a microphone in his face.

Robin also laid splayed out on the white snow, tears prickling down his face. His abilities hadn't been enough this time either, but it was so close. The taste of victory had been replaced by the bitterness of losing. A member of Beckenbauer's team had to remove the skis from his feet, as the biathlete in no way was capable of doing it himself.

A young and pretty journalist nudged the cool surface of a microphone onto Egil's hot and trembling lips. He was half blind since his gasping breaths had formed a thin haze on the glass of his huge protective glasses.ï¿½The journalistï¿½popped the standard question with a fake smile plastered on her face.

"How does it feel to have won the gold medal?" she asked with a heavy German accent.

Lonely, he wanted to say, but he couldn't do that. People couldn't know about how he really felt. *Betrayed. Worthless. Stupid.*

"It feels... amazing."

Chapter 2: Defeat

A very dark slice of whole meal bread, topped with a mixture of seeds, rested on a milky white plate. Next to the plate stood a glass of ice cold water and an eggcup living in symbiosis with the egg inside.

Egil was a man who recognized the importance of what he put in his mouth. The calories should never be empty like those in sweets, crisps and the remnants of the tasty food in the world. Every extra pound on his body, which didn't consist of pure muscles, would simply drag him down. He needed to have a somewhat light body to be able to quickly ski uphill and he needed the muscles to gain speed on even ground.

Being an athlete meant that Egil Brekke had had to sacrifice a lot of things. Every single day was a struggle to not be seduced by temptations such as candy and lazy days on the couch. No, he couldn't afford falling for all that and still be on top. Sometimes he didn't want to wake up early to go skiing and every now and then he felt like aiming at his trainer, during shooting practices, instead of at the actual target; but he had to push through the rough feelings and get himself together anyways.

He carefully smeared a lump of cottage cheese on the bread and then added a slice of lean turkey to the sandwich equation. The breakfast was full of protein and fibers which would keep his hunger in check until lunch time. Hopefully.

The biathlon star sat alone by a table, ignoring all of the talking and laughing around him. The luxurious hotel was the choice of many of his opponents and the biathletes came to the fancy dining room in streams to claim their pricey breakfasts. Egil didn't dislike his opponents; he just didn't feel like he had anything to contribute as they started conversing. See, they all liked discussing trivial things such as which one of the female racers had the nicest shaped butt, but Egil felt more comfortable while solely talking about skiing and shooting.

Egil didn't feel comfortable around other athletes. They could laugh, shake hand and exchange polite words, but the friendships were never real. As soon as the signal sounded and someone had to win and lose; their eyes turned cold and the politeness vanished.

After a while, someone sat down by Egil's table and he turned his focus from peeling off egg-shells to the new person. It was Karl, the Norwegian team's shooting instructor. He was a man in his early forties who had been just as much of a successful biathlete as Egil, but Karl's golden years were buried in the dust of a decade. Karl had been competing with the Swedish flag over his shoulders, but after retiring he had decided to move to Norway where the next generation of outstanding biathletes was born.

Karl smashed a German newspaper on the tabletop and grinned at Egil. "Read it! It's hilarious!"

Egil furrowed his thick, dark eyebrows and started scanning the front page with his eyes. He could barely understand a word of it. He shifted his gaze to the shooting instructor and looked at him questioningly. Flipping through the pages of a newspaper in a different language was merely a waste of time; time he could have spent on devouring the perfectly boiled egg in front of him.

"Stop glaring like you had missed all five shots in the first shooting," Karl mocked and bit into a marmalade covered biscuit, "Just go ahead and look at the sports pages."

Egil licked his lips and opened the newspaper's midsection.

On the left side was a picture of a hockey player with his teeth knocked out with some text to go with the picture. On the right side was a caricature of a man in a tight red suit. The man in the caricature sketch was

wearing a vest with the number one printed on it. The hair was messy like a hedgehog's and he was about to cross the finishing line on a pair of skis. The nose of the skier, as Egil had understood was a picture of himself, was crooked and crossed the line way ahead of the rest of his body. A red shade, matching Egil's Norwegian suit, painted the tip of the nose and went all the way to the forehead.

He dropped the newspaper, feeling slightly agitated. "Is it legal to publish something like this without my consent?"

Karl burst out laughing and chunks of the half-eaten biscuit fell out of his mouth and landed on the shiny tabletop. "Isn't it great? But wait, the text is the best part!"

"I don't understand German!" Egil hissed quietly to not draw attention to himself and shoved the newspaper over the table to Karl, who was still grinning foolishly.

Egil felt waves of discomfort rolling over him. He had never wanted people to think of him as inadequate in any way and the caricature showed a picture of himself that he didn't approve of. That man with the monstrous nose and empty eyes was not the man he wanted people to see.

"Lucky for you, my German teacher back in intermediate school was quite hot," Karl said, with a toothy grin, and cleared his throat before calmly reading the caption underneath the caricature out loud, "Biathlete Egil Brekke should be disqualified and forbidden from ever competing again. See, his nose creates a wind sucking which carries him forward in a rapid speed and crosses the finishing line before the other opponents have even started."

Egil felt his heart starting to maniacally pound against the inside of his ribs, like it had expanded and was about to break. A sudden lack of oxygen turned the dining room into a choking-chamber and he realized that he had to get out. He got up to his feet, clenched his fists, and walked away; away from the hotel's breakfast, away from Karl and away from all judgmental opinions.

His feet steered him towards his hotel room. He picked the coded card up from his pocket and slid it through the slit. A green light flashed and Egil pushed the door open and exhaled loudly. Well inside, the emotions started swelling up to the surface once again and he let them swirl around freely. Stumbling, he managed to kick his shoes off and stagger towards the bed room. The bed had become his haven and Egil nuzzled into the cover as his entire body trembled. Everything in the bed felt so soft and secure.

Egil couldn't understand why no one ever cared for his feelings.

Only because he was a grown and muscular man didn't mean that hurtful words didn't do any damage; because they did. If he weren't famous, nobody would've looked twice at Egil - and he knew that. He wasn't gifted with the looks of Robin Beckenbauer, but he had other things to offer and compensate the inadequacy with. He was a splendid biathlete and worked so hard to be the champion time after time.

Egil's mind grazed the memory of Frida. The memories of her sinful hips and almond-shaped eyes went right into his brain without permission.

Frida was a beautiful girl, indeed, and she had chosen to be with Egil even if she was way out of his league. He had been so happy to be privileged enough to indulge in her full lips and smooth skin. He had had someone to share his inner thoughts and dreams with and he hadn't planned on ever letting her go. She had had another agenda, though.

Deep down in the locked chest, which was his heart, Egil knew that he wouldn't have been able to be with the

lovely Frida Allum if he weren't a successful athlete. It had bothered him, but being all alone was more scary than the thought of living with a woman who didn't love him for who he was; but for his money and fame. Waking up with a pair of cold blue eyes was better than to wake up with an empty space on the mattress.

But then she had disappeared one day, stating what he had already known; that she didn't love him.

*

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going back home." She held a suitcase in each hand and wore a flustered expression on her beautiful face.

Snowflakes were falling and landed softly, resembling a white blanket on her golden locks of hair. They stayed visible for a little while and then melted into plain water.

Egil dropped his skiing poles and stretched his arm out towards the female he loved so dearly. The cold wind bit his cheeks and parts of his face were numb. "Why? Has something happened to your mother...?"

Frida shook her head and backed away from Egil's arm. "No, Egil. I'm leaving you. I'm going home."

"You're leaving me?" Egil asked, mostly to himself. His entire world was collapsing and his legs were shaking; both because of the skiing lesson he had just gotten home from and because of Frida's determined voice. "Why?"

"Egil..." her voice started to shatter like a glass hitting the floor.

Egil just wanted to reach out and hold her; tell her that everything would be okay if she took the words back and held his hand. He wanted to tell her to come inside and cuddle in bed like they had done so many nights before. But he couldn't say words like that anymore.

She inhaled sharply, grimacing and holding back tears, before opening her mouth again. "You're a great man, but I don't love you. I know nothing about your long term goals and I've realized that I don't know who you are. For a man who gives such expensive gifts it's a shame to confess that the love you've given is far from rich."

With that, she took her things and left Egil. He stayed outside and looked at the horizon for hours, like a Labrador waiting for its master to return home, hoping to see her car again. He waited until the sun was setting and his mind really started to understand that she was not coming back to him.

That night, Egil Brekke cried himself to sleep.

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The mere thought of the last time he had seen Frida brought back the emotions. It felt like a heavy hand pressed down Egil's chest and breathing became difficult. The pain of missing her had turned from psychological to physical a long time ago and every inch of his body ached.

He had to work harder and become an even better biathlete; only then would Frida ever consider taking him

back, Egil thought.

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