

Word Count:
1,499

PROMPTS:

Title:
FAILURE TO SUCCEED

Dialogue:
The sky is a different shade of darkness tonight.

Failure To Succeed

Officer Helgesen rubbed a coarse palm over a day's stubble. His other hand tapped a pencil against the blank notepad. By his elbow, a candle flickered in its hurricane lamp.

“Tell me your names, for the record.”

Sitting across from him on the other side of the metal desk, two dirty and dishevelled individuals stared back. The male sighed deeply before speaking.

“I’m Ben, and this is Chloe.”

Helgesen wrote this down.

“And why were you attempting to steal items from the Global Seed Vault?” he asked.

Ben started to speak, but Chloe shushed him urgently.

“You’ll ruin everything!” she hissed.

Ben turned his face towards her.

“Everything is ruined,” he said flatly, his words measured and emotionless.

“We can still make it back, there’s still time –”

That made Ben laugh.

“The CME has knocked everything out. There’s no power. They switch a car on, the circuits’ll fry. You know that.”

Chloe’s facial muscles worked as she tried to form a response.

Helgesen cleared his throat.

“Why were you stealing seeds?” he asked, pencil poised.

Ben sighed again and closed his eyes.

“We need viable stock to reseed Earth twenty years from now, so that those of us who haven’t already starved or been killed in other ways can grow enough food for humanity to be able to survive.”

The silence that followed was absolute, and broken only by Officer Helgesen – Knut to his wife and colleagues – dropping his pencil on the cold metal with a small clatter. He stood up, grabbed the lamp by its handle, crossed the small room and shut the door behind him.

In the main office, Officer Kari Jensen prodded another log into position in the fireplace and turned to face him, rubbing her hands together.

“How’s it going in there?” she asked, speaking in their native Norwegian.

Knut shrugged and set the lamp down on her desk, next to an untidy pile of folders and loose papers.

“They might be crazy.” He blew out his cheeks. “*Fæn*. I don’t know. They’re Americans.

Who did you say found them?”

Kari came over and retrieved her notepad.

“Anders Haugen. Statsbygg employee, security. He’s been making regular checks on the vault since the power went down. I’m guessing your thieves were taking the opportunity to sneak in when the CCTV wasn’t working.” She glanced from the paper to Knut and back again, a smile touching her lips. “Unfortunately for them, they hadn’t considered that it might be guarded by actual people.”

Knut permitted himself a weary laugh.

“Any word from the mainland yet?” he asked.

Kari shook her head.

“I’ve stopped trying to call anyone. This is some major solar activity. We’ll just have to wait it out until things calm down.” She moved to the window and looked out. “Until then, at least we can enjoy the show.”

Knut joined her and gazed through the glass, wiping at where his breath fogged it.

Longyearbyen’s main street, normally deserted, held a good smattering of well-wrapped locals all staring upwards at the undeniably spectacular effects of a massive geomagnetic storm. Ribbons of green, pink and brilliant white writhed and snapped across the sky. Bars of tinted light rained down on the awestruck observers. The air

seemed to glow softly, illuminating the snow-covered ground and playing over the surrounding mountains.

The largest solar coronal mass ejection to hit Earth since 1859 had, in essence, turned the polar night to day. It had also cut all power across the Svalbard archipelago – and presumably, if recent predictions had proven accurate, most of the world – and Knut had been unable to contact the mainland, or indeed anyone, for two days.

Knut thrust his half-numbed hands deep into his coat pockets.

“The sky is a different shade of darkness tonight’,” he said under his breath.

“What?” said Kari, surprised.

The fire sent shadows flickering across Knut’s face as he smiled sheepishly.

“Ah, just a line from some Sami poem. Never mind.”

Kari elbowed him lightly.

“Come on – I’ve finished that report, so I can help you with your interview. You know there should be two of us in there really.”

Knut pulled a face.

“What difference does it make? Without a tape recorder, it’d still be their word against ours.” He sighed and watched a cloud of his breath roll briefly across the room. “*Uff da*. Come on then.”

The two officers filed back into the interview room, Kari dragging a chair from the main office and Knut gently swinging the hurricane lamp, its elderly handle squeaking faintly.

The two suspects had not moved, though in the dimly-lit room Chloe’s eyes seemed red and puffy; Ben merely gazed into the middle-distance, eyes unfocused.

Knut and Kari sat down. Kari glanced at Knut, eyebrows raised. Knut gestured that she should start. Kari took a pen out of an inside pocket and clicked it on. She pulled Knut’s notepad around and quickly scanned the few words he had written.

“Okay, Ben, Chloe, where did you come from?” she asked, in English. The tip of her pen hovered above her own notepad.

Chloe sniffed and swiped at her nose with the back of her hand, but said nothing.

Ben flicked a tongue across his cracked lips.

“We’re time-travellers. We’ve come back because Earth is running out of food and people are dying. Our seed vault was destroyed, so we were sent to bring seeds back from your time period, so our government could grow food and get civilisation back on its feet.” He spoke as though he had been rehearsing his speech in his head while Knut was out of the room.

Kari stared at him, her mouth a tight line. She set her pen down, unused.

“You realise that I can’t possibly believe you,” she said. Ben shrugged.

“I’ve got no reason to lie,” he replied. “We were sent back in time to steal seeds from the Global Seed Vault, at a time when it still existed, and then bring them back, so that we could grow food and save the human race.” He laughed, then, tiredly and humourlessly.

Knut tapped his thumbnail against his top teeth.

“Okay then,” he said, “let’s say for argument’s sake that you’re telling the truth. I’ve got nothing better to do this evening, so why not, eh?” He took up his pencil again. “Why doesn’t the seed vault exist in your time?”

Ben sat back, his hands clasped loosely in his lap.

“It was destroyed,” he said simply.

“How?”

“It was bombed.”

“By whom?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“That’s very convenient.”

“Everyone was bombing everyone and everything,” said Ben, leaning forward suddenly, his eyes fierce. “I don’t know who bombed it, or why, but it was completely obliterated. Along with a ton of formerly arable land. That’s why we’re starving. That’s why we need your seeds – to plant in the few pathetic patches of useable land we have left.” He sagged and sat back.

“Of course, none of that matters now either,” he said bitterly, “because this was a one-shot deal and now we’re stuck here, and the mini-wormhole we used to get here has collapsed, so we can’t get back, so humanity is fucking doomed. So, y’know, *tusen takk*.” He spat the Norwegian words of thanks and fell silent.

Next to him, Chloe started to sob soundlessly.

Kari realised she was pushing the point of her pen through the paper, and clicked it off. She tried to get a grip on herself. She gave Knut the tiniest of smiles before turning her attention back to the two so-called time-travellers.

“Hang on,” she said, “doesn’t this cause some kind of paradox, you telling us about the future?”

Chloe’s sobs stopped abruptly.

“Nope,” said Ben, not meeting her gaze.

“Why not?”

“Because you won’t ever get to tell anyone,” he said, staring past her at the wall.

Knut sat up in his seat.

“Threatening a police officer is a very serious offence,” he warned.

Ben laughed and looked at him.

“I’m not threatening you! You think this business with the solar storm, the power being out, it’ll pass soon, yeah? Well it won’t. It’s wrecking power grid infrastructure all over the planet. There’s electrical fires that no one can put out because they can’t operate the

damn fire truck in a geomagnetic storm. Trillions of dollars of damage. Billions of citizens scared and angry. No electricity for months. Arguments, countries scrambling for resources, fearmongering, blame and counter-blame. Then some paranoid prick decides bombs are the way to go, and then we're all fucked. Meantime, you're on your own out here, with no way out. No one's coming to help you."

He fell back, breathing hard. The four of them sat, listening to the crackle of burning logs in the next room. Knut Helgesen cleared his throat, but found he had nothing to say.

Outside above the frozen landscape the aurora borealis danced and weaved. The residents of Longyearbyen watched in awe, ignoring the chill wind of the polar night.

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