

LITTLE TORVALD

Bjorn scratched his beard with his thumbnail, a kind of disengaged gesture, then spread his cards on the table. He had a pair of queens. It was a decent hand.

“Alright,” he sighed. “What have you got?”

The penguin stared at him for a moment. It was so small that Bjorn always had to lift it up and place it on a phone book on a chair across from him. That was the only use he ever had for the phone book.

The penguin presented three aces.

Bjorn cursed under his breath. The damn thing beat him more often than not. His wife, Tilde, had brought it home from a Greenpeace mission in the Galapagos and it had made itself at home, despite Bjorn’s protests: *Baby, we can’t keep a penguin. We don’t know anything about caring for one. Isn’t this some kind of housing code violation?*

But she wouldn’t hear of it. She was often gone for long stretches, cleaning the beaches and dangling herself in front of oil tankers and so forth. She insisted that he’d enjoy it. It was smart, she said. She’d named him Little Torvald, after Bjorn’s father. She’d even taught it to play poker on the trip back from the Galapagos so that it’d be good company for him.

The penguin cleared its throat. Bjorn harrumphed and tossed three salty, stinking anchovies into its opened beak.

“You’re welcome,” he grunted.

“Squack.”