



The Spirit of Solstice

For as long as men have looked upward, one star has seemed to refuse the turning of the heavens. Sailors trusted it. Travelers followed it. Legends gathered around it. Norse folklore depicts the North Star as the tip of a jeweled spike on which the sky rotates, guiding Viking ships far out at sea. The Paiute people tell of Naag, a brave mountain goat, who climbed the highest peak and transformed into a guiding light. Most famously, the North Star divinely led the Magi to the manger where the story of Jesus Christ began. Stella Polaris, more commonly known as the North Star has been a guiding light for many stories, across cultures throughout history.

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I. THE HOLY MAN

An elderly priest lay on his deathbed, staring out at the night sky through an open window. He'd spent most of his life looking toward that same point of light. A sister of the monastery approached, hoping to bring some comfort to a dying man. She whispered in his ear, "Father, Brother Nicholas has been canonized." The priest did not answer. The sister leaned in closer, perhaps he did not hear the news. She repeated louder than a whisper, "Brother Nicholas has been canonized. He'll forever be known as Saint Nicholas." Still no reaction, he continued laying motionless. In his last moments, his eyes remained fixed beyond her, through the open window, upon the one star that seemed not to move.

Decades earlier, another monastery window opened beneath the same star. He admired the heavenly night sky, searching for an answer to his question: "How shall I live my life best to serve the Lord?" Then a divine intervention, the angel Gabriel appeared. He directed the young clergyman "From the North Star your guidance shall be, to the land of the midnight sun. There you will find those who do not ask, what comes after life. Stand among them and see if your faith survives the present." He had a vision of a village atop a plush hillside and the face of the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid his eyes upon.

He awoke abruptly to the chirping of songbirds in the tree adjacent to his window, for a new day had begun. He cursed the morning song of nature, for his attempt to fall back into the dream was fruitless. The vividness of the dream kept him from sleeping.

He rushed directly to the bishop to tell of his vision, but the bishop kindly deflected the young clergyman by acknowledging "Brother, you've been studying the Gospel excessively. Just like your physical body, your mind also needs time to rest." His mission to the North was denied.

Letters were drafted, first to the diocese, then to Rome itself. Months went by without word, but he never lost faith. Then faith answered his call. He received a letter, sealed and signed by Archbishop Nicholas, which granted approval of his mission to the North.

The missionary froze at the sight of that signature. He retreated inward, tracing his thoughts back to the beginning, back to the moment his life first seemed to take shape.

As a young novice at Cluny Abbey in France, he'd shown uncommon promise. He studied the Gospel with fervor, blessed with a near-photographic memory that allowed him to recall scripture with exacting precision. Languages came easily to him, as did an understanding of the diverse peoples scattered across the Holy Roman Empire. By every measure, he stood at the top of his class.

Word soon reached the abbey that papal representatives from Rome would visit to hear sermons from the candidates. One would be chosen to return with them to the Lateran Palace, the very heart of the Church, for apprenticeship. The young clergyman did not hesitate. He wrote a sermon that came naturally as prayer itself: the life of Jesus Christ as a study in unwavering self-knowledge. He argued that to live as a Christian was to know one's place in this world, so there might be a place in the next.

Brother Nicholas, however, was cut from a different cloth. Broad-shouldered and commanding, with a voice that seemed to bellow from the heavens itself, Nicholas understood the power of performance. Knowing his Brethren's sermon would leave the deepest mark, he stole it the night before the delegates arrived and committed it to memory. The next morning, Nicholas eagerly volunteered to speak first, delivering the words his Brethren wrote with thunderous conviction.

The true author of the sermon burned with fury, but lacking proof, he swallowed his outrage and held to his vows. When his turn came, he spoke without notes, improvising a sermon that surpassed every other, except his own. The delegation chose Nicholas, who returned with his new colleagues to Rome. Francis was awarded mission in the British Isles, tasked with converting pagans on the fringes of Christendom.

For decades, he lived as the Church demanded: poor, obedient, tireless. Serving the destitute, spreading the Gospel among Anglo-Saxons and Celts, and asked for nothing in return. Yet somewhere beneath his devotion lingered the quiet belief that such sacrifice would one day be recognized, that Rome would finally call him home. At times, envy stirred when he thought of Nicholas and the life he might have lived. Each time, he treated it as temptation, confessed it silently, and buried it beneath duty.

But finally his calling had come. Alone, he crossed the North Sea and trudged through the arduous landscape of Scandinavia, reliving the past and pondering the future. What will happen once I convert these heathens?

Perhaps Rome would finally understand what his years of sacrifice had amounted to.

Though the North Star guided his path night after night, his destination never seemed closer. From his perspective, he did not travel alone; he traveled with faith. It was faith alone that he thrived on, and faith eventually led him to the hillside he envisioned.

The sun sat high in the sky as a single traveler approached from the south. It was summer in the Laplands. A small portion of indigenous people of the land, mostly women and children, sat in from of their lavvus watching as the stranger trekked up the lush green hillsides making his way closer to their settlement. Settling in such a remote region, it was not very often the villagers were graced with visitors. As word of the traveler spread throughout the tiny village, the group of spectators grew. Further up the hillside, even a herd of grazing reindeer stopped to observe. All eyes were on the stranger.

He wore a robe once made of fine silk with the Christian cross ornately embroidered on the lapels. The bottom of the now sun-faded and tattered robe revealed something that resembled fine leather-bound sandals, which now had countless miles on their worn-out soles. Though tired, his stride was steadfast and purposeful, each step led by an ornate staff bearing a crucifix made of polished silver glistening in the sun. His only other belonging, a satchel wrapped around his torso.

The stranger stopped before the gathering and laid down his staff; reaching out his hands, palms up to show he meant no malice. Softly, he spoke, “In nomine Patris et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti” while making the sign of the cross. The stranger continued to ask in Latin “Have you heard the good news?” He received no greeting, whether friendly or aggressive. The villagers stoically stared back, prompting him to ask the same question over and over in different languages. The Sámi, being from an isolated territory spoke their own language, which the traveler would have been hard pressed to have known. Eventually, when he asked the same question in Old Norse, a woman from the crowd pushed forward and responded “What is this good news you bring us stranger? The only news we have heard of your cross is one of violent atrocities.” The traveler’s eyes widened as the woman strikingly resembled the woman from his dream long ago. He kept his composure. The stranger assured the crowd “I come in peace to spread the word of Jesus Christ, King of the Jews, Son of God, who sacrificed himself for our sins, bestowing

himself as savior of all mankind. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. You can have eternal salvation and everlasting life. All you have to do is praise the Lord.” The woman answered “What is it that you want from us, Holy Man?” The Holy Man answered, “My simple wish is that you hear my story.” The woman agreed, and the crowd gathered in the center of the village.

He delivered his story as the woman translated to the rest of the village. Since he observed that the village was filled mostly with women, he strategically chose a specific passage from the Bible. He recalled his lessons from the abbey, knowing their maternal nature would embrace it. The missionary passionately delivered the story of the Nativity. With vigor and enthusiasm, he came to the resolution that the Magi were called upon to follow the brightest star in the sky, which led them directly to the manger where the baby Jesus lay swaddled and sleeping peacefully on that silent night. The Holy Man then made his segue by informing the Sámi that the angel Gabriel, the same angel that began the story of Jesus, personally, paid him a visit long ago. The angel told him to follow the most luminous star in the sky, like the Magi, and continue each night until the star disappeared.

He explained that since he had set off on his journey several months ago the light of day had lengthened little by little, until three days ago, when the sun never set. Thus, not a star was visible as the darkness never arrived. The Holy Man admitted he did not know where he was going, only following the path of faith. His emphatic conclusion of his divine mission delivered him exactly to their village, explaining that God had selected the Sámi as his chosen people. “Are you ready to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your own personal savior?”

The silence became deafening to the Holy Man. Confused as to why the angel of God would send him here only to be answered with silence, all the while remaining calm, he asked “When are the men of the village to return?” The woman pointed to the opposite side of the hill overlooking the sea where several fishing vessels were returning.

The crowd of women dispersed, some tending to the children of the village, the other to go prepare the catch of the day. The Holy Man kept a watchful eye over the woman from his vision, but cautiously did not approach. She whispered in the ear of an elder of the village. Her message caused the

elder to stare directly at the Holy Man. Suddenly, he found himself surrounded by the men of the village, returned from their fishing excursion.

The men were much less welcoming, demanding “When will your army arrive, messenger?” The obvious tensions led him to assure the men he was a lone, peaceful traveler. Requesting that if his hosts were gracious enough, he could perhaps tell them one story. The group of men began to grow aggressive, but then the surrounding circle parted as the elder of the village shuffled past to meet the stranger. Immediate silence and tension cleared over the crowd as the elder spoke in Old Norse “Traveler, you look weary. I know all too well the burden being away from home can bear on oneself. You are welcome to our feast as my guest. Afterwards, we will hear your story.” The crowd dispersed.

Soon after, the famished Holy Man devoured his plate of fish, fowl, bread, fruits and vegetables. His one untold complaint was there was no wine, for grapes were not fond of the short growing season of the region. The substitute was the Sámi’s grog, a fermented tonic of grain and bog myrtle, which the men of the village were swilling down. An attempt was made to swallow the concoction, but much to his chagrin, he could not stomach such an unsophisticated beverage. When the feast was over the Holy Man did not hesitate to ask for his turn to preach to the congregation.

The entire Sámi tribe gathered around the fire listening to the tales of their guest attentively. Just as the missionary knew the story of the miraculous birth of Jesus would resonate with the female contingent, he knew the male ego would connect with the story of Jesus’s resurrection. Once again he preached, his elder host translating for the tribe. A sermon delivered with passion and conviction, culminating with “He suffered, died and was buried. On the third day he rose again and his kingdom shall have no end.” The Holy Man then fervently proposed that all the tribe had to do was take the word of the Lord as their own. Accepting the one true God, they would be granted everlasting life after their spirits had abandoned their earthly bodies and joined in the kingdom of heaven to walk side by side with Jesus in eternal salvation.

The Holy Man could already envision the mass baptism ritual taking place tomorrow morning in the waters of the sea. Unfortunately, the concept of a single all-seeing, all-knowing God was foreign to the Sámi. Although the Holy Man took great pride in the delivery of his gospel, the Sámi did not share the same passion. The crowd continued their celebration of the summer

solstice. The Holy Man sat quietly contemplating what his next angle might be.

Typically, he could leverage the vast resources of the Holy Roman Empire to sway the village council, but the Sámi proved immune to such tactics. They faced no threat of invasion that required his protection, nor did they crave the gold and gemstones he might offer. Perfectly content in their isolation, the elders took pride in enduring the brutal winters alone. Cut off from civilization, the Holy Man found himself empty-handed, with nothing of value to offer a people who already had everything they needed.

The beat of the Sámi drums carried through the village as the elders began to chant. One by one, others joined the dance around the fire. The Holy Man remained seated with the rest of the village, watching the flames and turning the day's failure over in his mind.

He did not notice the young woman sit beside him until she spoke.

"Thank you for your stories."

He looked over and immediately recognized her. She was the woman from his vision.

She was naturally beautiful, with fair skin, dark brown hair, and striking green eyes. Young enough to have children, yet unlike the other women gathered around the fire, none sat at her side.

She smiled gently. "And don't be too discouraged. We Sámi are strong-willed," she continued. "We have to be. The winters make certain of that. The elders especially do not trust outsiders, and they have even less patience for outsiders telling them what to believe."

She studied him for a moment. "You think you failed."

With little acknowledgment, he continued staring at the fire.

"When I was a little girl," she said, "I died."

That brought his eyes back to her.

"At least, that is what my family tells me. I remember leaving this world. I remember seeing something beyond it. Something like the heaven you spoke of today."

The Holy Man leaned closer. "You saw heaven?"

"I don't know what I saw." She glanced toward the stars above the fire. "But a Spirit brought me back."

For the first time all evening, the weight in his expression lifted.

“When you spoke of your Virgin Mary,” she continued, “I wondered whether perhaps you came here for me.”

He stared at her.

“I have spent most of my life trying to understand what happened to me,” she said. “Maybe you have answers. Or perhaps I have something you need to hear.”

She held out her hand.

He took it.

“What is your name, Holy Man?”

The question caught him strangely unprepared.

He opened his mouth, but nothing came.

For years he had been Brother to one person, Father to another. Holy Man. Missionary. Servant. Titles given to him by churches, villages, and strangers until somewhere along the way they had replaced the name his mother once called him.

Flora waited.

At last, he turned back to her.

“Francis,” he said.

The name felt unfamiliar in his mouth.

Then, quieter, almost as though remembering himself:

“My name is Francis.”



II. VERNAL EQUINOX

“Well, Francis, my name is Flora. And these are some of my first memories.”

She smiled softly.

As a little girl, I thought Father was the biggest, strongest man in the world. Looking back, I suppose he was no larger than most. He simply carried himself that way. There was hardly an hour of daylight when his hands were idle. He fished the rivers, trapped small game, worked the fields whenever the weather allowed, and took on whatever labor the village required of him. He believed every able person owed something to the people around them.

Flora paused.

But for all his loyalty to the village, his family always came first. No matter how exhausted he was at the end of the day, he still found enough strength to lift me onto his shoulders and carry me home.

“Mother was different.” Flora smiled.

She was quiet and kind, but perhaps the most stubborn person Father ever encountered. Once she decided something was right, there was little point arguing with her.

She gazed toward the fire as though she could still see her there.

She could make something from almost nothing. She tanned hides, stitched our clothing, preserved food for the winter, and somehow managed to make a proper meal even when the only thing available was what most would consider scraps. I can still remember the smell of her fish stew simmering for hours over the fire. Everyone in the village claimed their own mother cooked it best.

Flora grinned.

“They were wrong.”

Francis smiled.

Father used to say he was the luckiest man in the village to have her beside him. That is how I remember them most. Not separately. Together. Whatever one lacked, the other seemed to possess. Father had the strength to begin something, and Mother had the stubbornness to see that it was finished. They worked for our village because they believed its survival depended upon every family doing its part. But when the work was done, we belonged to one another.

She turned slightly toward Francis.

For generations, our village had followed an old custom. Each year, one man was chosen to journey west to a remote trading post and remain there through the seasons. The Norsemen of the Sea would travel inland only as far as that place. No one in my lifetime knew why. They simply refused to come any closer to our village.

The chosen tradesman carried furs and hides gathered by our people and exchanged them for things we could not make ourselves—iron tools, foreign goods, and strange wares brought from lands we knew only through stories.

It was considered a great honor, Flora explained. And a dangerous one. The wilderness between our village and the post was unforgiving. Some men who made the journey never returned. But if a tradesman survived the year and returned with enough goods to benefit the village, he earned a seat among the Council of Elders.

Francis nodded. “And your father wanted such a seat.”

“Very much.”

There was affection rather than judgment in her answer.

He wanted to provide for our people. But I think he also wanted to prove himself. He knew that if the year went well, he might become the youngest man ever invited onto the council.

Flora gave a small laugh.

There was only one problem, Mother.

The lottery had chosen Father, and tradition expected him to make the journey alone. Mother found that tradition ridiculous.

She told him plainly that she had no intention of spending an entire year wondering whether he had frozen to death, starved, fallen from a mountain, or been murdered by Norsemen.

I can still remember their argument. Father shaking his head. “That wilderness is no place for a little girl.”

Mother’s retorted, “That creature is more savage than you’ll ever be. The wilderness won’t break her. A year without her father might.”

Mother informed him that his duty to the village did not relieve him of his duty to his family.

Flora shook her head at the memory.

“He never really stood a chance.”

Mother argued that Father could fish, hunt, and trade while she tended the post, prepared meals, worked the hides, and managed whatever tasks he

overlooked. More importantly, she refused to allow the family to be separated for an entire year merely because generations before them had decided that was how things should be done.

Eventually, Father surrendered.

“So the three of us went together,” Flora said. “Mother, Father, and me. And Musti, of course.”

“Musti?”

“Our dog. You will hear plenty about her.”

Flora’s smile lingered for another moment before slowly fading.

At the time, I thought we were beginning an adventure. I had no understanding of what that journey would become.

She looked into the flames.

As the snowpack finally surrendered to the spring thaw, we began the long trek toward our new homestead. I can still feel the chill of that slushy hike; the mornings were biting and sharp, but the climbing sun would quickly turn the world soft and warm. We traveled light, carrying little more than the clothes on our backs and enough dried rations to see us through. Our only true cargo was a heavy sack of furs—the currency my father would use to begin his bartering. Musti led our small procession. She was the bravest, most loyal soul I have ever known, with a thick black coat that defied the winter and ears that never stopped searching the wind. With her keen sense of smell, she would vanish into the brush, zigzagging through the trees only to reappear moments later with a partridge or pheasant in her jaws. Though I struggled to keep pace—often finding myself hoisted onto Father’s shoulders—Musti was my constant shadow. Each night, I fell into a deep, exhausted sleep with her warmth curled tight against my side.

After nearly two weeks of walking, we finally reached the valley.

Nestled between two great mountains stood a solitary lavvu beside a river, with nothing else for as far as I could see. Waiting outside was the man who had tended the trading post for the past year.

I will never forget the look on his face when he saw us coming. He rushed to greet Father as though we were family he had not seen in years. Only much later did I understand his excitement. After a year alone in that wilderness, we did not simply represent company.

We represented freedom.

Before Mother had even begun unpacking our things, the tradesman had Father walking the grounds with him. He showed him where to set his traps, where fish gathered along the riverbank, which patches of earth could be worked once the ground softened, and all the little tricks he had learned through a year of trial and error.

I followed close behind at first, pretending to understand.

I quickly became bored.

Then he began talking about the Norsemen.

I listened to every word.

He called them the Men of the Sea. Great warriors who crossed waters without end in wooden ships, traveling to lands farther away than I could imagine. He told Father they were enormous men with red beards and terrible scars, and that some had lost hands, eyes, even entire limbs in battle.

By the time he finished, I no longer imagined men coming to trade with us.

I imagined monsters.

I could not understand why Father had dragged us across the wilderness just to wait for a band of savages.

Then the tradesman showed us what they brought.

Inside the lavvu, he unpacked the rewards of his year one by one. There were things I had never seen and others I could not have imagined: strange spices, metal tools, fishing hooks, colored stones and fabrics from places whose names meant nothing to me.

Then he revealed a scythe.

Its iron blade caught the light.

I reached for it.

The tradesman slapped my hand away before my fingers touched the edge.

“Not for little hands.”

Mother gave me a look that confirmed his judgment.

I was promptly sent outside.

So Musti and I went to inspect the kingdom that was now ours.

The valley seemed endless to me. Our lavvu rested in a wide meadow surrounded by thawing tundra, with two mountains rising on either side like enormous walls. Beyond the meadow stood a dark forest so dense that even in daylight I could not see far between the trees.

A river wound through it all.

Fed by the melting snow high in the mountains, it was nothing like the gentle streams near our village. In spring it roared. White water broke against stones and twisted through the valley with enough force that I could hear it from our lavvu.

Naturally, I went straight toward it.

Musti followed.

I climbed onto a great boulder overlooking the current and leaned over the edge, hoping to see salmon fighting their way upstream. Musti remained below, barking furiously.

“Quiet,” I told her.

She barked louder.

The spray from the river had made the stone slick beneath my boots. I leaned a little farther.

Then my feet disappeared from beneath me.

For one terrible instant, there was nothing between me and the rushing water below.

I screamed.

Francis leaned forward. “Oh my. So that is how you died? You drowned?”

Flora smiled and shook her head.

“No, Francis. There is much more to my story.”

Before I could fall, two arms caught me beneath my shoulders and pulled me backward.

The tradesman lifted me from the rock and planted my feet safely on the ground.

Musti continued barking as though she had personally saved me.

The man knelt in front of me.

I stared down at my wet boots, waiting for the punishment that was surely coming.

Instead, he gently raised my chin.

“My, what a mischievous little creature you are.”

I said nothing.

His expression became serious.

“You listen to me. This valley is no place for a wandering child.”

He glanced toward the distant forest.

“The Norsemen say there is a Spirit in these mountains. A watcher who keeps guard over this valley.”

My eyes followed his toward the trees.

“A Spirit?”

“So they say.”

“Have you seen it?”

The old tradesman hesitated.

That was enough to convince me he had.

He leaned closer. “Whatever you do, never wander beyond this meadow without your mother or father.”

I should have been terrified.

Instead, I became fascinated.

“Is the Spirit good or evil?”

The tradesman considered my question as he stood.

“I suppose a little of both. It depends entirely on the circumstances of your encounter.”

Then he walked away.

Father and Mother exchanged an amused glance. They were pleased with his story. As far as they were concerned, the tradesman had found an excellent way to frighten their wandering daughter into staying close to home.

And for a while, it worked. Musti and I never crossed beyond the meadow. But from that day forward, whenever she and I played outside, I found myself stopping to stare into the dark spaces between the trees. I was no longer frightened of what might be hiding there. I was hoping to see it.

Fewer than two weeks passed before the Norsemen first arrived. Musti sensed them first. One afternoon, she suddenly stopped what she was doing and stared toward the ridge across the valley. Her ears stood tall. A low growl formed in her throat, followed by a burst of barking that brought Father running from the lavvu.

At first, I saw nothing. Then figures appeared along the crest of the mountain. One after another, they came over the ridge and began descending toward us in single file.

The tradesman’s stories had not prepared me. They were enormous. At least they seemed enormous to me then. Many had fiery red hair and great tangled beards. Some bore terrible scars across their faces. One man was

missing a hand. Another wore a patch over one eye. They carried axes, knives, and swords that looked far too large for any ordinary man to wield.

I immediately hid behind Mother. Even Musti, who I had believed feared nothing in the world, backed toward the lavvu with her tail tucked beneath her.

“They’re monsters,” I whispered. Mother placed a hand on my shoulder. “They are men.” I was not convinced.

The Norsemen crossed the meadow without shouting or celebration. For men who looked so frightening, they carried themselves with surprising restraint. When they reached Father, each greeted him before laying down a single item for trade.

One brought tools fashioned from iron. Another carried spices whose scents filled the air the moment their wrappings were opened. There were fishing hooks, fabrics, polished stones, silver trinkets, and objects from places I had never heard named before.

Father examined everything carefully. He was fascinated by the craftsmanship but far less impressed by anything merely beautiful. When one man opened a leather pouch filled with precious stones, Father rolled them between his fingers for a moment before handing them back. He rejected such treasure saying, “I cannot eat those.”

Last came their chieftain. He was older than the others, his beard streaked with gray. Around his neck hung a small round object unlike anything Father had ever seen. The chieftain removed it and placed it in Father’s palm.

Inside, a tiny needle trembled before settling in one direction. “North,” the chieftain said in broken words Father could understand.

Father turned the object in his hand. The needle swung and returned to the same point.

The chieftain explained that his people followed the North Star across open water, but clouds and storms sometimes hid the heavens. The compass allowed them to find north even when the stars disappeared.

Father studied it for a moment, clearly impressed. Then he handed it back.

The chieftain raised an eyebrow. Father pointed around the valley. “I am not going anywhere.”

The chieftain looked toward the mountains. Then back at Father. “You would be surprised,” he said slowly, “how easily a man can lose himself in this land.” Father smiled politely but refused again.

In the end, he traded Mother's finest furs for an iron spade, fishing hooks, and the strange reel the Norsemen attached to a long fishing rod. Father understood those things immediately. They could feed us.

Once the trading ended, Mother had prepared a feast.

She cooked nearly everything Father had caught since our arrival: fish, small game, bread, roots, and whatever else she could gather together.

The Norsemen ate with an appetite that seemed impossible to me. They tore meat from bones with their hands, snapped fish apart at the spine, and tossed what remained into the fire. Watching from beside the lavvu, I decided the tradesman had been right about at least one thing. They certainly ate like barbarians.

Mother stayed mostly inside while they feasted. She did not want any alternative appetite focused on her.

When the meal was finished, the Norsemen passed around a skin of mead and settled near the fire. That was when they became interesting. They began telling stories.

At first, I understood nothing. Father understood only slightly more. But their gestures filled in what their words could not. They spoke of the sea. Of cities surrounded by stone walls. Of markets overflowing with spices and cloth. Of deserts where almost nothing grew. Of temples larger than our entire village. Of peoples whose skin, clothing, language, and gods were unlike anything I had ever known.

That night became my first lesson in their language.

Francis suddenly raised his head as it donned on him.

"Old Norse."

Flora looked at him.

"That is how you understood me when I arrived. I spoke half the languages I knew before anyone answered me. Then you stepped forward."

Francis considered this for a moment, another small piece of his journey falling into place.

"Please," he said. "Continue."

As the mead loosened their tongues, their stories became less noble. Though they called themselves merchants, they admitted freely that their wares were gained by friendship or force, barter or beating. Many of the items they presented were once owned by men who no longer living.

Father listened to every story.

For a moment, I think part of him wanted to leave with them, to climb aboard one of their ships and discover whether all those impossible places truly existed. But Father knew himself. He belonged beside rivers and fields, not on battlefields or open seas.

I tried to remain awake. I failed. The last thing I remember was the glow of the fire, the rumble of strange voices, and Musti's warm body pressed against mine. When I awoke the following morning, I was inside the lavvu. I hurried outside.

Alas, The Norsemen were gone. Only footprints in the grass and a circle of smouldering ashes remained behind.

For days afterward, I watched the ridge, waiting for them to return. I was still afraid of them. But I no longer believed they were monsters.

This became a seasonal rhythm. Every month they returned, greeting Father before displaying an array of new exotic wares. Once the bartering concluded, they would feast upon Mother's cooking, eventually settling around the fire to swap stories over drink. Father's camaraderie with the Norse strengthened, at least in his eyes. With every visit, our family grew richer in both supplies and language. Our small settlement flourished, and almost before we realized it, the season of the midnight sun was upon us.



III. SUMMER SOLSTICE

With so much daylight, and Mother and Father ahead of schedule with their chores, that summer seemed to leave us an extraordinary amount of time for play.

Once each day, Mother would take me down to the river, where a handful of great boulders interrupted the current and gathered the water into a perfectly calm swimming hole. It was there that I learned to swim. Mother would stand waist-deep with her arms stretched toward me while I kicked and splashed my way across the clear water, Musti padding in circles around us.

The days were warm, but never unpleasant in our little meadow. Everything seemed to be growing at once. Grass stood high around the trading post, wildflowers crowded the edges of the clearing, and the sun lingered so long in the sky that evening hardly seemed to arrive.

At supper, there was always plenty to eat. I would savor every bite while Mother and Father teased one another across the table, exchanging smiles and little remarks I did not yet understand but knew somehow meant they were happy.

Afterward, when there was still light in the sky, Father would take Mother by the hand and lead her into the meadow. They would dance without music while Musti and I followed behind, doing our best to imitate them.

Mother had once fretted terribly over our decision to occupy the old trading post. Yet somehow, living there had drawn the three of us closer together.

When I think back upon that summer, I remember very little of the work. I remember the river. I remember full plates. I remember Mother laughing in Father's arms beneath a sun that seemed unwilling to set. Those are some of my fondest memories.

Most of all, the memory of the Norse sitting among us that summer remains imprinted in my mind. Father was different with them upon their return. During their first visits, he had treated the Norsemen cautiously, never forgetting that we were merely occupying a trading post that had stood long before our arrival. But with every successful exchange, his confidence grew. By summer, he greeted them less like strangers and more like men with whom he had established an understanding.

When the Norse began unloading their goods, Father raised his hand. "Trade can wait," he told them. "First, we eat." He said it with such authority that, for a moment, one might have believed the trading post belonged to him.

Mother glanced at him knowingly. Father had already explained his reasoning to her. A man with a full stomach and a cup of mead in his hand, he figured, might place a greater value on a bundle of furs than one weary from travel.

Whether his strategy worked, I cannot say. But the Norsemen happily accepted the invitation.

That evening they sat among us around the fire while Mother served the abundance summer had provided. Father laughed with the Norsemen and joined freely in their mead. Once again, he passed over the silks. He passed over the tools as well. For quite some time, however, he rummaged through a leather sack of jewels and ornaments the Norse had brought with them. He slipped rings over his fingers, draped necklaces around his neck, and held polished stones toward the endless sun of summer, marveling at the way they caught the light.

Yet one by one, he returned them to the sack. In the end, Father traded for spices, earthen cookware, and a great iron cauldron. "For your mother," he told me.

He presented it to her with considerably more ceremony than an iron pot deserved, explaining that it was a gift for her relentless efforts to keep our family together while his duty kept him occupied with the trading post. Mother was flattered nonetheless. And perhaps that was worth more to Father than any jewel in the sack.

The mead also loosened Father's tongue. Normally reserved around the Norsemen, that evening he began asking questions he had apparently been carrying for some time.

"Why here?" he finally asked their chieftain. "You travel all this distance into these mountains merely to trade with us?"

The chieftain looked toward the darkening tree line. "We do not come here merely to trade."

Father waited.

"Odin led our forefathers into these mountains many generations ago," the chieftain continued. "There is a Spirit here. It provides us with our potion."

Father let out a laugh. Much like he did when the previous tradesman told his cautionary tale to me. “What sort of potion?”

The chieftain considered the question before answering. “It intoxicates a man, though not as mead does.” He lifted his cup and studied it for a moment. “Mead makes a man forget himself. The potion allows him to see what remains when himself is forgotten.”

Father said nothing.

“When it takes hold, yesterday releases its grip, and tomorrow ceases troubling the mind. For a short while, a man stands nowhere but where he is.” The chieftain stared into the fire.

“You have not lived among warriors. A man may bind a wound to his flesh and watch it close with time. But there are wounds no cloth can bind.” The other Norsemen had grown quiet. “We have watched brothers die. We have burned villages. We have done things a man cannot undo and seen things a man cannot forget. Such memories follow warriors home.”

He tapped two fingers against his chest. “The potion quiets them. Sometimes long enough for a man to see beyond the veil of his own experience.”

Father appeared mystified. “I have traveled these woods for miles,” he said. “Every ridge. Every stream. Every valley I could reach. I have never encountered any Spirit.”

The chieftain looked at him. For several moments, he said nothing. Then the faintest smile appeared beneath his beard. “The Spirit knows of you.”

Father laughed uneasily, assuming perhaps that something had been lost between their languages. “If it knows me, then I should think I would know of it.”

The chieftain’s smile disappeared. “You will never see it unless it wills itself to be seen.”

Father searched his face for some indication that he was joking. There was none.

Then, as abruptly as the subject had begun, the chieftain’s expression hardened. “We will speak no more of the Spirit.”

Father opened his mouth, but thought better of whatever question had come to him. And the conversation ended.

Between the seasonal visits of the Norse, life in the valley settled into a rhythm that was predictable, yet beautiful.

My days remained largely tethered to Mother, while Father became increasingly consumed by his labor. He worked from first light until evening with a feverish determination, knowing that every additional bushel and every new hide strengthened his position when the Norse returned to trade.

Father believed the grueling work of a man was no place for a child. Mother, however, had a way of softening even his firmest convictions.

Eventually, she persuaded him to take me foraging. He agreed on one condition. "You stay beside me. You do not wander, and you do not fall behind."

I promised.

We crossed the sun-drenched meadow and disappeared beneath the woodland canopy. The air immediately cooled. Sunlight filtered through the leaves in scattered beams, and the ground beneath our feet remained soft and damp despite the warmth of summer.

Father moved through the forest differently than Mother did. She wandered through nature as though visiting an old friend. Father studied it. His eyes searched the ground, the bark of trees, the shape of leaves, always looking for something useful.

Then he stopped beside a moss-covered rise beneath the trees. Clusters of golden mushrooms pushed through the damp earth. "Chanterelles," Father said, crouching beside them.

He showed me their golden color and the ridges running beneath their caps, then carefully demonstrated how to gather them without disturbing the ground around them. "There'll be more here," he assured me. Together, we filled our basket.

I remember feeling immensely proud carrying our harvest home across the meadow, as though I had finally contributed something worthy of Father's labor.

That evening, Mother cooked the chanterelles until their aroma filled the trading post. It seemed impossibly rich to me.

"This," he declared, pointing toward Mother with what remained of it, "is what you make when the Norse return."

At the time, it simply sounded like praise.

When the Norse returned toward the end of summer, Father greeted them not as visitors, but almost as old friends.

Whatever caution he had once shown around the Norsemen had vanished. He slapped shoulders, laughed loudly, and drank freely from the mead they passed around the fire. By the time Mother brought out supper, Father had already consumed considerably more than I had ever seen him drink.

He announced the meal before Mother had even finished serving it. "Now this," Father boasted, holding his cup toward the Norsemen, "is worth traveling into the mountains for. You'll be trading me rubies and emeralds for another spoonful before the night is through."

Father plunged his spoon into his bowl and took an eager mouthful. His expression changed immediately. He chewed once, then again.

The dish resembled the one Mother had prepared weeks earlier, but the rich flavor of the chanterelles was gone. In their place, she had diced turnips with onions and herbs. It filled the stomach well enough, but little more.

Father set down his spoon and returned to the lavvu. "What is this?" Mother looked down at the bowl in his hand.

Father took another taste, as though hoping the first had somehow deceived him. "Where are the mushrooms?"

Mother lowered her voice. "We ate what remained. You said there were more. I thought there were, but I was not prepared for their arrival today."

Father stared at her.

"Then you should have made something else."

"I did."

Father gestured angrily toward the bowl. "That is what you made? The Norsemen will not part with their finest goods if we serve them slop," Father hissed. "I told them the food they were going to eat would be irresistible."

For a moment, neither spoke. Father shook his head and pushed through the opening of the lavvu. Instead, he went back to his mead.

By the time the feast ended and the trading began, Father could hardly stand without swaying. I watched from a distance as the goods were laid between the men. Father's attention drifted toward the familiar leather pouch he had examined during their previous visits. The chieftain opened it. Even from where I stood, I could see flashes of red and green catching the sunlight as Father sifted through them. The chieftain shook his head. Father offered more. Again, the chieftain refused.

Then the chieftain looked toward Father's stack of furs and said something I could not hear. Father hesitated. Only briefly. Father shoved the entire bundle toward him.

The Norseman gathered the furs. Father closed the jewels inside the little pouch and, rather than carrying them proudly back to Mother, glanced toward the lavvu to make certain she was not watching. Then he slipped the pouch beneath his tunic. He returned to us with nothing in his hands.

Father stumbled past her. "They wouldn't trade."

Mother frowned. "Nothing?"

Father turned on her. "What did you expect after that meal?"

She stared at him.

"I spent the whole summer building our stores, and you served them boiled turnips."

"It was all we had."

"No. It was all you prepared."

Mother's expression changed, but she said nothing. Father staggered toward his bedding.

"If you had made the meal you promised, perhaps they would have been more generous." Within moments, he collapsed and fell into a deep, drunken sleep.

Father had been so furious with Mother the night before, blaming her tasteless meal for the poor trade, that I became certain the simplest way to restore peace was to replace what had been missing. If I brought home more chanterelles, surely everyone would be happy again.

So the next morning, I took my satchel and slipped away toward the forest.

The sun shone warmly over the open field, but once I passed beneath the trees, the air cooled at once. The canopy dimmed the day, and the forest floor, which had seemed so alive when Father first brought me there, now felt strangely still beneath my feet.

I knew the way. At least, I believed I did. I followed the same path Father and I had taken before, past the moss-covered rise where he had crouched beside the golden clusters and shown me how to gather them carefully. I hurried ahead, already imagining Mother's delight when I returned with a full satchel.

But when I reached the place, I stopped. There were no chanterelles, only dry earth. The moss that had once seemed lush and cool now felt brittle to the touch. The soil had hardened. Dead leaves crackled beneath my shoes. I searched around the rise once, then twice, parting fern and leaf litter, hoping I had somehow mistaken the place, but I had not. The mushrooms were simply gone.

I stood there, disappointed and confused, when I heard it. A low, rumbling growl. It came from somewhere deeper in the woods. Every part of me went still.

Then came the sound of something large moving through the trees. Branches snapped. Brush shuddered. Whatever it was, it was coming closer.

I turned and ran.

I fled as fast as I could, clutching the satchel against my side, as I raced toward the pale strip of daylight ahead where the meadow began. Behind me, I could hear the thing crashing through the undergrowth, gaining ground.

I dared glance over my shoulder. What I saw has never left me. It stood like a man, yet was no man. Its body was massive and covered in dark, matted hair. From its head rose the horns of a goat, curving upward through the shadows of the trees. Its face was ghastly, with a long tongue rolling from its open mouth, and when it bared its teeth I saw fangs where no gentle woodland creature should have had them. Its hands ended not in fingers, but in claws.

I stumbled over a root and fell hard to the forest floor. The beast bounded toward me. Certain I was about to die, I buried my face in the earth and raised my arms over my head.

Then, in an instant, something leapt over me. I looked up just in time to see Musti hurl herself at the creature. The forest erupted in snarls and thrashing movement. Musti barked with a fury I had never heard from her before. The beast roared in reply.

“Musti!” I screamed. But she did not come. Terrified, I scrambled to my feet and ran for the meadow, sobbing as I went. Behind me, I could still hear the sounds of their struggle among the trees.

When I burst into the lavvu, Mother took one look at me and rushed to my side. “Flora, what happened?”

Through tears, I told her everything. I told her I had gone to the forest to gather chanterelles. I told her the patch was gone, the ground dry, and that a

horned beast had chased me through the woods. I told her Musti had saved me.

Mother listened, and though she saw how frightened I was, her face softened with the patience adults reserve for children they believe have scared themselves.

"There is no evil spirit in the forest," she said gently. "The tradesman filled your mind with stories, that is all."

I shook my head. "It had horns. And claws. And fangs."

She brushed the hair from my face.

"You were alone and frightened. Your imagination ran wild. You likely saw a deer."

"A deer does not have fangs," I insisted.

Mother forced a smile, though I could tell she wished to calm me more than convince me.

Father, meanwhile, showed little interest in any of it. He sat with his head in his hands, moving slowly from the previous night's indulgence. "If Musti ran off," he muttered, "she'll return when she finds her way home." Then he waved me back outside and told me to keep quiet, for his head was splitting.

So I sat in the meadow and waited. To pass the time, I wove a crown of wildflowers and kept my eyes fixed on the edge of the forest, certain that at any moment Musti would emerge, victorious and unharmed. But she did not.

That evening, after supper, Mother sent me outside to call for her, though she warned me not to go far from the lavvu.

As I stepped out, I heard Mother's voice behind me. She had finally asked Father what had become of the trade.

"At the feast," she said, "you returned with nothing. No wares, but no furs either. You gave them the furs in exchange for nothing? Why?"

Father's answer came sharp and immediate. "Because I do all the work around here, that's why."

"That is no answer."

"It is the only one you need."

There was a pause, and then his anger rose again. "I labor from dawn until dark. If I choose to keep something for myself once in a while, I've earned it."

Mother answered more quietly, but there was steel in her voice. "What did you keep?"

Father scoffed.

“You were happy enough with the cookware I brought you last time. If you’re so troubled by my judgment, I can always trade that back as well.” Another silence followed. Then came Father’s final warning.

“Do not question me again.”

I stood very still outside the lavvu, not fully understanding what had passed between them, only sensing that a cold darkness was creeping in.

Shortly after I watched father standing alone among the rows of crops. The swagger and good humor that had once accompanied his work were gone. He bent down and touched the leaves with uneasy hands.

Even from where I stood, I could see them drooping. The earth around them looked pale and thirsty.

As the summer sun sank lower in the sky with each passing evening, the meadow changed with it. The lush green of early summer faded to brittle amber and gold. The river where Mother had taught me to swim receded day by day until the calm pool between the boulders grew too shallow for our lessons. Even the fish disappeared from its dwindling current.

The fields suffered next. Without rain, the crops withered faster than Father could save them. What little remained was scarcely enough to feed ourselves, let alone prepare the feasts Father had come to believe essential to his trading.

Yet we could not simply abandon the valley. Father refused to return to the village early, and certainly not without the goods he had been expected to acquire through trade. For the first time that summer, I saw fear settle upon Father. “We had best pray to the gods for rain,” he told Mother and me.

Flora paused, her eyes glistening as she looked toward the Holy Man. “I remember crying myself to sleep night after night. Father prayed for rain. Mother prayed that our food would last. But I prayed for only one thing.”

Her voice trembled.

“I prayed to your God, to Father’s gods, to the Norse gods—to any god who might hear me. I didn’t care if the meadow ever turned green again. I didn’t care if the river filled or the crops returned. I only wanted Musti to come running out of that forest and play beside me again.”

She wiped a tear from her cheek.

“For many nights afterward, I dreamed of her. Sometimes the beast kept her captive somewhere deep within the mountain, waiting for me to come and rescue her. Other dreams were worse.”



IV. AUTUMNAL EQUINOX

Summer in the Laplands was short, and almost as quickly as it had begun, it started drawing to a close. The meadow had already faded from green to amber, and soon the trees followed. Over the course of a month, their leaves turned brilliant shades of orange, red, and yellow before beginning to scatter across the valley.

The mornings grew colder. Frost lingered in the shadows until the climbing sun warmed the meadow, only for the chill to return as soon as it slipped behind the mountain. Most noticeable of all was the returning darkness. After a summer when daylight had seemed endless, night now arrived earlier with each passing evening, until for one brief moment the sun and darkness appeared to divide the day evenly between them.

Father greeted the Norse with enthusiasm. Their monthly arrival had become something he looked forward to, and once again they spread an assortment of foreign goods across the meadow for trade.

There were plenty of useful things among them—iron tools, cookware, fishing hooks, fabrics, and other wares Father would once have examined carefully.

Instead, his attention settled on their weapons.

I had seen the swords hanging from the Norsemen's belts during every visit, but Father had never studied them so closely. Their hilts were wrapped in leather and decorated with intricate knotwork carved into the metal. Their long blades caught the fading sunlight whenever the warriors moved.

Normally, no Norseman would have considered parting with his own weapon. This time, however, a spare sword rested among the goods.

Father lifted it. The weight surprised him.

He adjusted his grip and attempted one of the sweeping movements he had watched the Norsemen perform during their evening training. The blade dragged awkwardly through the air, nearly carrying Father along with it. The Norsemen erupted in laughter.

Father steadied himself and forced a smile. The Chieftain reached out and took hold of the blade before Father injured himself—or anyone nearby.

"That one would cost you dearly," he said.

"How dearly?"

The Chieftain glanced toward the furs and provisions Father had prepared for trade.

“Every hide you possess. And most of your food.”

Mother looked over from where she was preparing the evening meal. Even I understood that would be foolish. Father, however, did not immediately put the sword down.

The Chieftain studied him for a moment before reaching among the other goods and lifting a long-handled spear.

“This would suit you better. If you truly need to defend yourself, you would have a better chance keeping danger at a distance after what you just showed us.”

Several Norsemen chuckled.

“Though I would suggest using it for hunting,” the Chieftain continued. “You are still several men short of conquering an empire.”

The meadow erupted in laughter. Father eventually laughed with them, though his face had reddened.

He tested the spear in his hands. Unlike the sword, its purpose seemed immediately familiar. He could thrust it forward without surrendering his balance, and its long reach made even an inexperienced man appear more dangerous than he was.

The Chieftain nodded.

“That is a weapon a hunter can use.”

Father looked once more toward the sword. Then back to the spear.

“What will you take for it?”

Mother said nothing. She returned her attention to the meal, but even from where I sat, I noticed the way her eyes lingered on Father as he continued turning the spear in his hands.

By morning, the Norse were gone, and life returned to the long stretch between their visits. Everything we did in the wilderness revolved around their return. Father hunted and trapped for furs. Mother preserved whatever food we could spare for the next feast. Even the garden and river seemed to have a purpose measured by what they might provide when the Norsemen once again descended from the ridge. That was the cycle of our existence there: prepare, wait, trade, and begin preparing again.

But as autumn deepened, the valley began providing less and less. The drought continued. Day by day, the river shrank until the current that had once

thundered through the valley became little more than a shallow ribbon slipping between exposed stones. The fishing holes disappeared first. Then the fish themselves. Father would stand along the bank for hours with his line in the water and return with nothing.

The garden suffered just as badly. The leaves curled inward beneath the dry sun, and the vegetables stopped growing long before they were ready to harvest. Mother watered them with whatever she could spare, but the earth seemed to drink everything without giving anything back.

Even the animals began to disappear. Father's traps remained empty for days at a time. The rabbits and birds had moved on in search of food and water, and the larger game followed them. Sometimes we would hear Father returning through the meadow and know from the silence that he had found nothing.

Our meals became smaller. At first, I hardly noticed. I had gotten into the habit of saving a little piece from every meal for Musti. Sometimes it was a strip of fish skin, other times a bite of bread or a scrap of meat. I would wrap it carefully and leave it near the edge of the meadow before bed.

"For when she comes home," I told Mother. For a while, Mother allowed it. Then one evening, as I reached to set aside a piece of dried fish, she gently caught my wrist.

"No, Flora."

I looked at her.

"That's for Musti."

Mother's eyes softened.

"I know."

"She might come tonight."

"I know."

I waited for her to let go. She didn't. "You need to eat it."

I looked down at the little piece of fish in my hand. "But what if she's hungry?"

Mother swallowed before answering. "If Musti comes home, we will find something for her."

I wanted to believe her. Slowly, I put the fish into my mouth. After that, Mother no longer let me save anything.

The days continued to shorten, and so did our portions. Before long, the clothes Mother had sewn so carefully for me no longer fit the way they once

had. My trousers sagged around my waist, and the sleeves of my tunic seemed wider around my arms. Mother began tying them tighter with strips of leather. But I noticed the way she watched me whenever I ate, as though counting every bite.

The Norse returned, once again, near dusk. I watched them descend the ridge in their familiar single file, dark figures against the fading autumn sky. Father stood beside the lavvu waiting for them, already anxious over what little we had to offer.

I scarcely noticed him. There was something moving alongside the Chieftain. Small. Black. Trotting faithfully at his heel.

For a moment, I refused to believe what I was seeing. Then the little figure broke from the procession and came racing across the meadow.

“Musti!”

I ran as fast as my legs could carry me. She crashed into me with enough force to knock me backward into the grass. I wrapped both arms around her neck while she covered my face with frantic kisses, whining and twisting beneath my embrace as though she could not get close enough.

She smelled like smoke, wet earth, and the forest. But she was alive. My Musti had come home.

Only after I had buried my face in her thick black fur did I notice she was not entirely the dog who had disappeared into the woods. A piece of her pointed right ear was missing, and along one hind leg the fur had only just begun growing over a long healing wound.

The Chieftain stopped beside us.

“We found her high in the mountain,” he told Father.

I looked up. “The Spirit?”

The Chieftain glanced toward the distant peak. “The Spirit found her first.”

I tightened my arms around Musti.

He crouched and ran one hand over the scar along her leg.

“Her flesh required healing,” he said. “Her heart did not.”

I did not understand. The Chieftain looked at me. “She never stopped searching for you.”

I turned triumphantly toward Mother. “See? I told you there was a Spirit in the forest.” Mother looked from Musti to the Chieftain and then toward the mountain. For once, she had no answer.

Father had little patience for mysteries. “Yes, yes. The dog has returned,” he said. “Come. Let us trade before darkness falls.”

Nothing could have spoiled my happiness that evening, but Father’s faded quickly. The Norsemen laid out their wares across the meadow. There were tools, cookware, cloth, fishing hooks, and other useful things, but none of the jewels or precious metals Father had begun watching for during their visits. He moved through the goods without enthusiasm, exchanging only what little he believed necessary.

The greater embarrassment came when it was time to eat. Mother had saved everything she reasonably could for their arrival. Even so, what she placed over the fire could hardly be called a feast. A rabbit turned slowly upon the spit beside two smaller animals Father had managed to trap. There was no fish. No fresh vegetables. No overflowing bowls like those we had offered during summer. Mother had even taken from the food she had been preserving for winter.

The Norsemen noticed.

Father finally admitted what none of us could hide. “The river is nearly gone,” he told the Chieftain. “There are no fish. The garden has stopped producing, and most of the game has left the valley.”

The Chieftain looked over the meager meal.

Father lowered his voice. “If this continues into winter, we may not survive here.”

The Norsemen exchanged uneasy looks. The Chieftain showed little sympathy. “We will ask the gods for rain.”

Father scoffed. “Rain?”

The Chieftain looked toward the darkening sky. “Tonight is not an ordinary night.” He informed Father that they would require the lavvu for their rite.

Father stared at him. “That is our shelter.”

“And tonight you have little food to offer the men who traveled here expecting your hospitality.”

The veins in Father’s neck bulged. For a moment, I thought he might challenge him. Then he looked around at the armed warriors gathered in our meadow and reconsidered.

Mother gathered our blankets. Musti and I followed her outside.

The Norsemen built a great fire inside the lavvu. Through its open entrance I watched the flames throw amber shadows across the skins while smoke curled upward through the vent.

Musti curled beside me, and I rested my hand upon her back as though afraid she might disappear again if I let go.

Inside, the Norsemen gathered around the fire. The Chieftain raised his drinking horn. "Tonight the light and darkness divide the heavens between them," he said. "From tomorrow onward, darkness will prevail. May the light we carry tonight remain with us through the long dark, until the sun returns."

One by one, they drank. There was no laughter. No boasting. No drunken singing. This was different from every gathering I had watched before. Some of the warriors remained inside while others disappeared into the forest.

Soon a low chant began from within the lavvu. One voice became two, then four, until the sounds blended into a single steady tone. Smoke rose through the opening above them in a narrow column. I swear the smoke lifted high into the sky in waves, as if imitating the sound. I watched, fascinated.

Behind me, Mother and Father argued in whispers that gradually became harder to ignore. Mother wanted to leave the valley. Father refused. She reminded him that winter was coming and we had barely enough food for ourselves. Father reminded her that returning to the village without the goods expected of him would mean failure. Their voices continued behind me while I pressed closer to Musti.

Eventually the chanting stopped. The warriors who had entered the forest returned carrying a deer. The smell of roasting meat soon drifted across the meadow.

Father noticed immediately. His anger returned. "I have hunted these woods for weeks." He stood. "If there is game in this valley, it belongs at our table." He started toward the lavvu.

Before he reached it, the Chieftain emerged carrying one of the butchered hindquarters. He placed it in Father's hands. "A gift." Father stared at the meat.

"We asked the gods to return the rain," the Chieftain said. "Perhaps they will show you mercy."

Father's anger disappeared almost instantly. He looked toward the fire glowing inside the lavvu. "Then let me join you. We will celebrate."

The Chieftain shook his head. "Tonight is for our people."

“I have traded with you all summer. Fed you. Drank beside you.”

“That does not make you Norse.”

Father’s jaw clenched.

The Chieftain’s eyes lowered toward Father’s clothing, settling upon the hidden pouch beneath it. “There is one offering that might persuade the gods to recognize your sacrifice.”

Father instinctively placed a hand against the pouch. “The jewels?”

The Chieftain said nothing. Father’s answer came quickly. “No.”

The Chieftain nodded as though he had expected nothing else. “Then keep them.”

He turned back toward the lavvu. “We will return next month. If the gods are generous, perhaps then you will have your feast.” Father stood silently with the deer leg in his hands.

That night, I went to sleep beneath the open sky with an empty stomach. I did not care. Mother would make stew from the venison in the morning. And for the first time in what felt like forever, Musti was curled against me again. For that night, it was enough.

I awoke the following morning to Father shouting outside the lavvu. “Rain!” For a moment, I thought something was wrong. Then he shouted again. “Rain! It’s raining!”

I crawled outside to find him standing in the meadow with both hands raised toward the sky. A few scattered drops darkened his tunic. He tilted his face upward and began laughing manically.

Mother stepped outside behind me. Another drop fell. Then another. Within minutes, the soft patter became a steady drizzle.

Father laughed and spun me around in his arms. “The gods heard us, Flora!” Whether it was his gods, the Norse gods, or something else entirely, I did not care. Rain was falling. By midday, the drizzle had become a downpour.

We retreated inside the lavvu, where embers from the Norsemen’s fire still glowed beneath the ash. Mother coaxed them back to life and hung a pot above the flames. Into it went the venison the Chieftain had given us.

Soon the smell of stew filled the shelter. For the first time in weeks, there was enough food that Mother did not watch every bite I swallowed.

Father was in the best spirits I had seen him in all autumn. With the rain pounding outside and no work to be done, he sat on the floor and played games with me while Mother tended the stew. Even she began smiling again.

Musti lay nearby, content beside the fire. For a few hours, it felt as though everything had been restored.

By evening, however, the rain had not stopped. It fell harder. Water streamed down the mountainsides and collected throughout the meadow. The river, little more than a trickle the day before, began to roar again beyond the walls of the lavvu.

Father called it a blessing. Mother was not so certain. Still, my belly was full, Musti was curled against my side, and Mother and Father were together beneath the same warm shelter.

I fell asleep listening to rain drum against the skins above me. I cannot remember another sleep from my childhood that felt so peaceful.

It did not last. Something cold splashed across my face. I opened my eyes to darkness and shouting. Mother was standing over me. "Flora. Wake up."

Before I understood what was happening, she pulled me from my bedding and lifted me into her arms. Water reached nearly to her knees. Musti barked frantically beside us.

Across the lavvu, Father stumbled through the darkness gathering whatever he could carry. "The furs!" he shouted. "Where are the furs?"

Another rush of water poured through the entrance. Mother screamed at him to leave them. Father grabbed one bundle before the current knocked several others loose and swept them across the floor. The last thing he managed to grasp at was the spear he'd recently traded for.

"Go!" Mother shouted. She carried me outside. The meadow had disappeared beneath rushing black water. Rain struck my face so hard that I could barely open my eyes. Mother struggled forward with me pressed against her chest while Musti fought through the water beside us. Behind us, Father emerged carrying what little he had managed to save.

We ran toward the forest. The ground rose beneath the trees, and Mother continued climbing until the water could no longer reach us. Only then did she lower me to the ground.

We turned toward the valley. The river had escaped its banks entirely. Water rushed across the meadow where I had played only days before.

Firewood, baskets, and everything else we had failed to carry floated through the darkness.

Then the current reached the lavvu. At first, the shelter merely leaned. Father took a step downhill. The supporting poles shifted. The whole structure folded into the rushing water and disappeared downstream.

Father stood motionless. Everything we had owned was gone. Mother pulled me against her beneath the branches of an evergreen. Musti squeezed between us, shivering as violently as I was.

The gods had answered our prayer for rain. None of us had thought to ask them when to stop.

I awoke sometime after sunrise still wrapped in Mother's arms. Father carried me back down the mountainside.

The rain had weakened, but the valley below scarcely resembled the place where we had lived. Mud and silt covered the meadow. Our garden—the same garden that had gone months begging for water—was buried beneath it.

Mother stared at the empty place where our lavvu had stood. Then she began to cry. "We have to go home."

Father continued sorting through the debris. "Not now."

"There is nothing left."

"We rebuild."

Mother stared at him.

"Winter is coming."

Father said nothing.

"We have a child."

"I know that."

"Then look at her."

Father stopped. Mother stepped between him and the wreckage. "We tried. You fulfilled your duty as long as you could. No one can blame you for this."

His expression hardened. "You think I failed."

"I think we need to go home."

"I have not failed."

"Then what do you call this?"

Father spun toward her.

"This was my mission!"

Mother went silent.

“You were never supposed to come,” he continued. “You insisted. You brought yourself here. You brought her here.”

Mother’s face changed.

“You wanted us with you.”

“I was ordered to come alone.”

“That is not the same thing.”

“If you wish to return, then leave. But I will stay here and finish what I was chosen to do.”

Mother tried to answer, but Father seized her by the arms.

“Stop questioning me.”

His grip tightened. Then he saw me watching. For several seconds, no one moved. Father released her. Mother rubbed her arms but said nothing. Neither did he. Something between them had changed.

From that morning forward, silence settled over our family in a way the floodwater never could. Yet the rain had brought one mercy.

Within days, the river ran deep again. Fish returned to its current, and Father was finally able to bring food home. Mother smoked everything we could spare while Father began cutting poles for another lavvu.

Musti and I understood, in whatever way a child and dog can understand such things, that it was better to stay out of their way.

Autumn continued disappearing around us. The rain had stripped the brilliant orange and yellow leaves from the trees until most stood bare against a gray sky. The mountains lost nearly all their color except for the dark green of the pines and firs climbing their slopes. The air grew colder. Each morning, frost lingered longer in the meadow.

Over the following weeks, my parents rebuilt our settlement. Father raised another lavvu, this one sturdier than the first and farther from the river. Mother spent her days smoking fish and rebuilding the food stores we had lost. Eventually, she counted enough preserved trout to last us perhaps a week.

Only then did she make a request of Father. “Take Flora with you tomorrow.” Father looked up. “She has been good through all of this. Take her into the forest. See what the two of you can find.”

Father glanced toward me. I had learned better than to ask myself. After a moment, he nodded. “Fine.”

After weeks spent watching my parents work and listening to the wind grow colder outside our new home, even a day of searching the forest sounded like an adventure.

Father was reluctant to take me, but the next morning Musti and I followed him into the forest with our bellies full of smoked trout.

Before we left the meadow, he stopped and looked down at me. "This is not an adventure." I nodded. "You stay beside me. You keep pace. And when I tell you not to touch something, you listen."

I nodded eagerly. Father gave Musti the same stern look, though she seemed considerably less impressed by it.

Father checked several traps along the way. All were empty. The cold had also ended the season for most berries. We found a few nuts beneath the trees, but not nearly enough to justify the morning.

Musti, however, seemed delighted to be back in the forest. Every so often she would stop abruptly. Her nose lifted into the air. Her tail began wagging. Then she would give a short, excited bark toward the trees.

The first time, Father ignored her. The second time, he called her back. By the third, he had lost patience. "Musti. Enough." She returned obediently, but kept glancing over her shoulder. There was nothing frightened in her manner. Quite the opposite. She behaved as she had whenever Father returned from a long day away—restless, excited, certain that someone she knew was nearby.

I followed her gaze into the trees. For an instant, I thought I saw something move between two distant trunks. Something tall. Then it was gone.

"Flora." Father was already several paces ahead. I hurried after him.

Our morning might have produced almost nothing had the rain not left the forest floor so damp. Mushrooms were everywhere.

They pushed through beds of moss, clustered against fallen trees, and appeared beneath leaves wherever Father brushed them aside. He knew many of them and showed me which were safe to gather.

"Never eat a mushroom because it looks familiar," he warned. "If you are not certain what it is, leave it where it grows."

Soon my satchel began to fill.

There were bolettes, small brown caps Father recognized, and several other varieties he assured me Mother could cook safely.

Then I saw one unlike all the others. It stood alone beneath a pine, brilliant against the gray and brown forest floor. Its cap was bright red and dotted with little patches of white. I crouched beside it. It looked less like something that had grown from the earth and more like something painted there. Before Father could stop me, I plucked it from the ground.

He immediately struck it from my hand. “No.” The mushroom landed several feet away.

I stared at him. “But it’s pretty.”

“That does not mean it is food.”

He wiped my hand against my sleeve. “That one can poison you. Do not touch another.”

I looked back toward the bright red cap lying among the leaves. Father had already moved on. Musti had not. She stood several paces away, staring into the forest again. Her tail began to wag. A soft whine escaped her.

Then, somewhere beyond the trees, came a faint whistle. Something more than the whistle of the wind through the trees. Only a few notes. A short melody.

Musti sprang back down our path. “Musti!” Father’s shout stopped her. She stood frozen for a moment, ears raised, staring toward the sound. Then the forest became silent again.

Father muttered something under his breath and continued walking. I lingered just long enough to glance once more toward the mushroom he had knocked from my hand. When I looked again from farther down the trail, the patch of red beneath the pine had disappeared.

By afternoon, my satchel was full enough that Father finally declared our search worthwhile. I carried it proudly across the meadow. Mother was waiting outside the lavvu when we returned. Her face brightened when she saw us.

“Well?” I opened the satchel for her. She laughed. “Look at all of this.” She sorted through our harvest, setting aside the chanterelles and several other mushrooms for supper.

Then she disappeared inside the lavvu and returned carrying something folded over her arms. “I have something for you as well.” It was a coat. She had sewn it from soft fur while Father and I were away. I slipped my arms inside, and Mother pulled it closed around me. It fit perfectly. “You’ll need it soon,” she said. “The sun will not warm the days much longer.”

That evening, she added the boletes to a pot of soup. After a day spent walking through the cold forest, I ate until there was nothing left in my bowl. Musti curled beside me. I rested my head against her warm body and closed my eyes. Before sleep took me, I thought once more of the whistling melody in the woods. And of how happy Musti had been to hear it.

Winter arrived before any of us were ready for it. One morning, the river carried a thin crust of ice along its edges. Within days, that crust stretched farther toward the center until only a narrow channel of dark water continued to move beneath it. Father chopped holes through the ice and lowered his line wherever he could, but the fish that had returned after the flood became harder and harder to reach.

Then the snow came. At first it dusted the meadow and melted beneath the afternoon sun. Soon it stopped melting at all. Each storm covered the last until the grasses disappeared, the garden vanished beneath white drifts, and the valley that had once seemed so full of life became silent.

Mother had not been given enough autumn to prepare.

The flood had taken much of what she had preserved, and the short weeks afterward had produced only enough fish and mushrooms to begin rebuilding our stores. She rationed everything carefully, dividing meals into portions that seemed smaller each day.

Father and Mother could endure them better than I could. I had never regained the weight I lost during the drought. Mother had already tightened my clothes once that autumn. Soon she had to do it again.

At first, hunger only made me tired. Then I stopped wanting to play. Musti would bring me sticks or paw at my blankets, waiting for me to chase her as I once had through the meadow. Most days I could only stroke her head and tell her I would play later.

Later stopped coming. I slept longer. Sometimes I would wake believing only a few moments had passed, only to discover that Mother had already melted another pot of snow or Father had returned from another fruitless day in the forest.

When Father returned from his hunts, he'd brush snow from his clothes, and sit near the fire without speaking. Mother would continue whatever work occupied her hands. The silence between them became heavier than their arguments had ever been.

Occasionally Father caught me watching him. He would force a smile. "We'll find something tomorrow." I wanted to believe him.

As the nights lengthened, daylight became something we waited for rather than expected. The sun barely cleared the mountains before sinking behind them again, leaving the valley in blue-gray darkness.

I began measuring days by meals instead. Sometimes there were two. Sometimes there was only one. Mother often claimed she had already eaten. Even then, I knew she was lying.

One afternoon Musti began barking outside. I opened my eyes. Through the entrance of the lavvu I saw figures moving across the snow. "The Norse," I whispered. For the first time in days, I sat upright without Mother helping me.

There were fewer of them than before. Their beards were crusted with frost, and thick layers of fur covered nearly everything but their eyes. Father hurried outside to greet them. I watched from my bedding.

The Norse had brought goods to trade, but Father had almost nothing left to offer. There were few furs, and Mother could not spare enough food to prepare even the poor feast we had served during their previous visit.

The Chieftain looked over what remained of our stores. "There will be no trade tonight." Father's face fell.

The Norsemen were permitted to sleep beside our fire before continuing their journey in the morning. They spoke quietly among themselves while I lay beside Musti, listening to voices that once meant feasts, stories, and laughter. Now merely a memory of summer.

By dawn, the Norse were preparing to leave. Father followed the Chieftain outside. Their voices carried through the thin walls of the lavvu.

"We cannot survive like this," Father said. I had never heard him speak those words before. There was no anger in his voice. Only fear.

"My daughter is starving." Mother turned toward me. Father continued. "You prayed for rain, and rain came. Ask Odin to give me something to hunt. Anything. A deer. An elk. I need enough to get them through winter."

The Chieftain was silent for a moment. Then he answered. "Odin favors his own people." Father said nothing.

"You have traded with us," the Chieftain continued. "You have eaten beside us and drunk from our cups. But that does not make you Norse."

"Then tell me who will help."

Another silence. When the Chieftain spoke again, his voice had softened. "There is one in these mountains who may."

I heard footsteps crunch through the snow. Through the entrance, I saw the Chieftain raise his hand toward the mountain peak. "The Spirit."

Father followed his gaze. "What does it want?"

"That depends upon what you are willing to give."

Father stood motionless. The Chieftain lowered his arm. "If you seek its mercy, bring an offering." Then the Norsemen departed.

I watched their dark shapes disappear one by one beyond the snowy ridge. Father remained outside long after they were gone.

That evening, I could barely keep my eyes open. Mother sat beside me, rubbing warmth into my hands while Musti lay pressed against my legs beneath the blankets.

Across the lavvu, Father paced.

"We should leave," Mother whispered.

"We would never make it back."

"We cannot stay."

"I know."

His answer frightened me more than shouting would have. Mother began to cry. Father knelt beside the fire and buried his face in his hands.

Their voices faded in and out as sleep pulled me away. I tried to remember summer. The meadow had been green then. Mother and Father danced in the endless sunlight. The river was deep enough to swim in. There was always another meal. Musti chased me through the wildflowers. For a moment, I could almost feel the warmth of it again.

That is the last thing I remember. Flora's eyes glistened as she looked across the fire at the Holy Man. "That was when I saw the heaven you spoke of."

Francis leaned closer.

"The hunger disappeared first," she said. "The pain in my belly simply vanished. I felt no cold. No weakness. I was weightless, as though my body had been left somewhere far behind me." Her gaze drifted toward the flames. "Even with my eyes closed, there was light. Brighter than anything I have ever seen, yet it did not hurt to look upon it. Colors moved through it that I have never seen before and could never describe to you now."

She searched for the words. “It was like staring into an abyss, only its opposite. Not nothingness.” She looked at Francis. “Everything.”

The Holy Man said nothing.

“I have never known such peace,” Flora continued. “I do not know how long I remained there. A moment, perhaps. Or an eternity.” She lowered her eyes. “And then an angel came for me.”

Francis straightened.

“I remember seeing him descend toward me. After that, I remember very little. Only that he brought food to Mother and somehow returned me to this world.”

Francis stared at her. “You saw an angel?”

Flora nodded. “And he gave Father a purpose for my life.” She became quiet. For the first time since she had begun telling her story, she seemed reluctant to continue.

“When I became old enough to understand such things, Mother explained what the hunger had done to me. My body never developed as the other girls’ did. I have never bled.”

Francis slowly understood.

Flora looked toward the other women gathered throughout the village, mothers tending children near their lavvus. “I cannot bear a child.” The words came without bitterness, but Francis heard the years behind them.

“No Sámi man would choose a wife who could never give him sons or daughters. So I have never married.” She gave a faint smile. “I have always wanted a child.”

Francis felt something tighten within him. Flora looked directly at him again. “That is why your story of Mary stayed with me.”

“The Virgin Mary?”

She nodded. “A woman chosen by heaven to bear a child when no ordinary explanation could account for it.”

Francis’s expression changed.

Flora continued before he could speak. “For years I have wondered why I was sent back. Why would heaven return me only to leave me unable to fulfill the purpose given to Father?” She hesitated. “Then you arrived.”

“You followed the North Star to our village. You spoke of an angel who appeared to you, just as one appeared to me. And then you told the story of a

virgin chosen to bring your Christ into the world.” She moved slightly closer. “I cannot help wondering whether these things are connected.”

Francis felt the warmth of the fire suddenly become oppressive.

Flora’s voice softened. “Perhaps I misunderstood the promise all these years.” She placed her hands gently over his. “Perhaps I am the virgin meant to bring your Christ back into this world.”

Francis froze.

Flora searched his face. She did not need to ask the question aloud.

For one dangerous moment, Francis allowed himself to imagine that his journey north had not been intended to convert a people at all. Perhaps he had been sent for her. Not as missionary. As man.

The thought frightened him by how easily it came. He looked at Flora, the woman from his vision, sitting before him exactly where Gabriel had promised she would be, and felt the certainty of his vows weaken beneath something far more human.

Then a voice came from behind them. “Flora.”

She withdrew her hands.

Francis turned.

The village elder, who invited Francis to stay, stood at the edge of the firelight. Francis could not tell how long he had been there. “It is late,” the old man said. “Our traveler should rest. He has a long journey ahead of him tomorrow.”

Flora looked up at him affectionately. “Yes, Father.”

Francis glanced sharply between them.

Father. The old man from the Council was the same man Flora had described as young, tireless, ambitious—the man who had carried her upon his shoulders and brought his family into the wilderness so many years before. Time had bent his back and silvered his hair, but now that Francis knew where to look, he could see him.

Flora rose. She bowed her head gently toward Francis. “Good night, Holy Man.”

“Good night, Flora.”

She kissed her father upon the cheek and disappeared toward her lavvu. The elder waited until she was beyond hearing. Then he sat where his daughter had been. “We appreciate your visit,” he said. “You seem to be a kind man, and I believe you mean well.”

Francis waited.

“But you must be careful filling my daughter’s mind with promises from your God.”

“Promises?” Francis looked perplexed.

“She has spent much of her life searching for meaning in what happened to her. You arrived carrying a story that resembles the one she desperately wishes to believe.”

“But she died.”

The elder’s expression remained still.

“If what Flora told me is true,” Francis continued, “then she died in that valley. Yet she sits here tonight speaking with me.”

The old man said nothing.

“She spoke of an angel,” Francis pressed. “She said that angel saved her and gave you a purpose for her life. What happened after she lost consciousness?”

For a long while, the elder stared into the fire. Francis waited. “What happened after has nothing to do with faith, but perhaps it will give your journey here a different purpose.”

Francis said nothing more.



V. WINTER SOLSTICE

“I knelt beside my daughter and watched her sleep. At least, I told myself she was sleeping. Her breathing had become so faint that I would place my hand beneath her nose simply to feel whether air still passed through it. Her cheeks had hollowed. Her lips were dry. Even beneath the blankets, I could see how thin her arms had become.

Everything I had imagined for myself when we first entered that valley seemed foolish then. The successful tradesman. The youngest man ever invited onto the Council of Elders. The man who would return home carrying treasures from distant lands while the entire village gathered to admire what he had accomplished. None of it mattered. My daughter was dying.

Celeste sat beside her, rubbing warmth into Flora’s hands. I could hardly bring myself to look at either of them.

“The Chieftain told me there may still be someone who can help us,” I finally said. Celeste looked up.

“The Spirit in the mountain.”

She stared at me as though she were too exhausted even to argue.

“He said that if I seek its mercy, I must bring an offering.”

Celeste looked around the lavvu. There was almost nothing left. The iron cauldron. A handful of dried food Mother had been stretching farther than food ought to stretch. The useless spear.

“What do we have left to offer?” she asked. “Everything we owned was washed away in the flood.”

I did not answer. Celeste watched me. Then her eyes narrowed. I reached beneath my tunic. Even after everything that had happened, I hesitated before pulling out the little leather pouch. The stones inside shifted softly against one another.

Celeste stared at it. “What is that?”

I loosened the cord and opened the pouch. Even in the dim firelight, the jewels seemed to glow. Rubies. Emeralds. Polished stones and bits of precious metal I had spent the summer gathering little by little from the Norsemen.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then Celeste looked at me. “You have had those this entire time?” I lowered my eyes. Her voice rose. “Through the drought? Through the flood?”

“Celeste—”

“While your daughter has been starving?”

I closed the pouch. “I was saving them.”

“For what?”

I wish I could tell you I had some noble answer. I did not. I looked down at the little sack in my hands. “For when we returned to the village.”

Celeste stared at me. I tried to explain myself. “Think of what they will say when they see them. No one from our village has ever possessed anything like this. After everything that happened here, at least we would return with something to show for it.”

Celeste stood. “Return?” Her voice was so sharp that Flora stirred beneath the blankets. Celeste pointed toward her. “Look at your daughter.” I did. “Look at her.” Her voice broke. “There may be no return to the village. There may be no spring. That child is starving before your eyes while you carry treasure against your chest.”

I tried to speak, but she would not let me. “You wanted to prove yourself a tradesman. You wanted the elders to admire you. You wanted everyone in the village to know what a great man you had become.” She stepped closer. “You fool.”

I had not been spoken to that way since I was a boy standing before my own mother. “You are not worthy of a place among the elders.” The words stung. Then she looked toward Flora. “You are hardly worthy to call yourself her father.” That was the wound that opened me.

I looked at Flora lying beneath the blankets. For the first time, I saw plainly what I had become. When we left our village, I believed I wanted to serve our people. I wanted to provide something useful. I wanted my family to be proud of me. Somewhere along the way, that changed. Providing became proving. Duty became pride. And before I realized what had happened, I cared more about returning home appearing successful than whether the people I loved ever returned home at all.

I had failed as a tradesman. I had failed Celeste as a husband. And worst of all, I had failed the little girl who once believed I was the strongest man in the world.

Celeste began gathering what remained of our belongings. She placed them inside the great iron cauldron I had once traded for during the summer, the gift I had proudly presented to her as proof of how well our post was prospering. Then she stood before me and held out her hand. I knew what she

wanted. For several moments, I could not move. Then I placed the pouch of jewels into her palm. Celeste dropped it into the bottom of the cauldron.

The stones struck the iron with a heavy clatter. She pushed the cauldron toward me. "You know what you must do." So I went.

The climb had been difficult enough during summer. In winter, it was nearly impossible. Snow reached my knees in some places and my waist in others. Beneath it were rocks, roots, and fallen branches I could not see until I stumbled over them.

The cauldron dragged behind me on a length of rope. With every step, its iron rim caught against something buried beneath the snow. Sometimes I screamed at it as though the miserable thing itself were responsible for everything that had happened to us.

I was starving. I was exhausted. And somewhere during that climb, I stopped worrying whether I would ever return. I only knew that Flora would die if I did nothing.

As I climbed higher, the trees changed. The bare branches of the lower forest gave way to pine and fir. Beneath their heavy limbs, the snow became shallower, protected from the worst of the storms.

For the first time in hours, I could walk without lifting my legs nearly to my waist.

That was when I saw the tracks. At first, I thought they belonged to a bear. Then I stepped closer. I placed my boot inside one of the prints. My entire foot disappeared within it.

I had hunted those mountains for nearly a year. I knew the tracks of deer, elk, bear, wolf, and every smaller animal that wandered the valley. Those prints belonged to nothing I knew. They continued upward through the pines. So I followed them.

The higher I climbed, the fewer sounds I heard. No birds. No wind. Only the scrape of the cauldron behind me and my own breathing.

Eventually, the tracks led to the face of the mountain. There, between two great stones, was the mouth of a cave. The footprints disappeared into the darkness. I stopped.

I had no torch. And whatever courage brought me that far vanished when I imagined meeting the creature that had made those tracks somewhere beyond the reach of daylight.

So I remained outside. "Spirit!" I called. My voice traveled into the cave. A moment later it returned to me.

Spirit.

Spirit.

Spirit.

Nothing else answered. I knelt in the snow. "I do not know whether you are a god, a beast, or nothing more than a story told by frightened men." Again, only my echo answered.

"But my daughter is dying."

I told the darkness everything. I told it about the drought. The river disappearing. The crops dying. The flood carrying away our home. The winter arriving before we could rebuild what we had lost. I told it that I had hunted over and over again and returned home with nothing.

Then I told it the truth I had been avoiding. None of those things were why my family was dying. They were suffering because I had been too proud to leave. Because I could not bear to return home a failure. I pulled the cauldron toward me. Inside were the last possessions my family had in the world. At the bottom rested the leather pouch. I reached for it. The stones felt strangely heavy in my hand. I stood at the entrance of that cave holding more wealth than anyone from our village had likely ever possessed. And still I hesitated.

What if there was no Spirit?

What if I threw those jewels into the darkness and nothing happened?

A handful of stones could not feed my daughter, but surely somewhere they could be traded for food. For shelter. For passage home. Throwing them away felt like madness.

Then I saw Flora as she had been in summer. Running through the meadow. Laughing as Musti chased behind her. Sitting upon my shoulders because her legs were too tired to walk. I remembered how tightly she used to wrap her little arms around my head. And I understood that I would gladly surrender every treasure in this world simply to hear her laugh again.

I drew back my arm. And threw the pouch into the cave. For a moment, there was silence. Then, somewhere deep inside the mountain, I heard stones scatter across rock.

I waited. Nothing happened, no Spirit appeared, no god spoke, no miracle came. I stood there staring into the darkness, feeling more foolish than I had ever felt in my life.

Then something strange happened. I stopped caring. I had climbed that mountain believing some god or Spirit would save my family because I brought it something valuable. But those jewels had never been valuable. Not compared to Flora. Not compared to Celeste. Not compared to getting the three of us home alive.

For the first time since we entered that valley, I no longer cared whether anyone believed I had succeeded. I no longer cared whether I ever sat among the elders. I did not even care whether the Spirit existed.

I turned away from the cave. If I survived the descent, I would return to my wife and daughter. And somehow, whether the gods helped me or not, I would find a way to bring them home.”

That mountain showed me no mercy. By the time I exited the canopy of pines, the sky had already begun to close. Snow came first in scattered flakes, then in great driving sheets that stung the face and blinded the eyes. The wind rose with it, howling down from the peak as though the mountain itself had decided I had trespassed long enough. I trudged through deepening drifts, half-falling, half-sliding, until I could no longer tell whether I was descending the mountain or merely surviving it one step at a time.

When at last I reached our meadow, the storm had nearly swallowed it whole. The lavvu was little more than a white mound beneath the night. Only the top of it still showed above the drifts. I clawed my way toward the tunnel Celeste had kept open and crawled through on my hands and knees.

She met me at the entrance. Even before I spoke, she saw the answer in my face. I had no miracle to place in her hands. No meat. No firewood. No blessing from any god or Spirit of the Mountain.

Behind her, Flora lay beneath the blankets where I had last seen her. Her breathing had grown so faint it scarcely seemed like breathing at all.

That night I sat beside her and listened for each shallow rise of her chest as though the next might be the last. Celeste said little. There was nothing left for either of us to say. All the pleading had already been done. All the anger had already spent itself. We had passed beyond argument into that terrible silence where fear has no language.

At some point, I could no longer bear the shelter. I crawled back outside and stood alone in the tunnel of snow, the wind hissing softly over the top of it. I do not mind admitting to you now that I wept. I wept like a child. Not only for Flora, though mostly for her. I wept because I knew at last that every warning I had been given, by Celeste, by the Chieftain, perhaps even by the gods themselves, I had answered with pride. And now the cost of my pride lay dying inside.

Then I heard it. At first I mistook it for something the storm was doing among the trees. A faint chiming. Delicate. Uneven. So soft I nearly doubted it.

Then it came again. Bells. A calming jingling, keeping a steady measure, as if many small bells were moving together through the night.

I looked toward the treeline. Out from the storm came reindeer. Two at first, then four, then more behind them, their antlers black against the snow and their breath pouring in silver plumes from their nostrils. They emerged at a gallop, strong and sure-footed despite the weather, harnessed not loosely as wandering animals but joined together in a great team. Behind them they pulled a sled that skimmed the snow as though it hardly touched it.

Upon that sled stood a man. At least, I believed him to be a man. He was larger than any I had ever seen, broad across the shoulders and wrapped head to foot in white fur so that he seemed almost part of the storm itself. A heavy hood shadowed his face. Snow clung to him without seeming to burden him. He stepped from the sled into the mouth of my tunnel and, in that moment, appeared so immense that I felt small as a child before him.

“Are you man or spirit?” I asked.

He did not answer the question.

Instead, he asked in a voice rough as bark, “Did you bring the offering?”

I swallowed and nodded. “I cast it into the cave.”

He studied me for a moment, as though measuring whether I spoke the truth. Then he reached behind him and lifted something from the sled.

My cauldron. He carried with the ease of Flora carrying a basket of wildflowers. He placed it before me. “Tell your wife to set water to boil when you return,” he said. Nothing in his voice suggested this was a request.

I stared at him, wanting to ask a hundred questions at once, how he had found the cave, how he had retrieved the cauldron, whether he was the Spirit itself or servant to it, but the words tangled in my throat.

When I crawled back through the tunnel, Celeste looked up sharply. “There is someone outside,” I told her. “Set water to boil. Now.”

She searched my face for sense, found none, and yet obeyed. I think by then we had both reached the place where any glimmer of possibility, no matter how strange, was still preferable to despair.

By the time I emerged once more, the great figure was back upon the sled. The reindeer stamped and snorted, eager for movement. He held out a drinking horn toward me. It resembled the horns the Norsemen had raised during their rites, though this one was darker, older, etched with faint carvings worn smooth by long use.

“Drink,” he said.

I took it. The smell alone nearly made me gag. What filled it was sharp and sour, bitter enough to sting the nose. I had tasted many unpleasant things in my life, but never anything like that. Still, I lifted it and drank. The liquid hit my tongue like poison. It was acrid and rank, with a musky tang that turned my stomach at once. I nearly spat it back into the snow. My throat tightened around it. My eyes watered. The cold air only sharpened its foulness.

The figure held out the horn again. “More.” I obeyed. By the second swallow my stomach was twisting. By the third my hands had begun to tremble. I could feel the stuff spreading through me like something alive, strange and unwelcome. When the horn was emptied, he held out his hand. I took it. With one pull he hauled me onto the sled beside him. Then the reins snapped, the bells rang, and the reindeer surged forward.

What followed is difficult to explain plainly, for plain language does little justice to a night such as that.

At first I felt nothing beyond motion and cold. The sled flew over the snow with astonishing speed, its runners whispering across the surface so lightly that it scarcely seemed we were bound to the earth. The wind struck my face hard enough to make my eyes water. Yet after a short while, something began to change.

The cold did not leave me. Rather, it ceased to feel like an enemy. I still knew it was there. I felt the pressure of it on my skin, the movement of it through my hair and across my fur, but it no longer seemed bent on killing me. It became only another part of the night—like the snow beneath us, or the breath of the deer, or the sky above. My breathing deepened. The tightness in my chest loosened. I realized, quite suddenly, that I was no longer shivering.

We dropped onto the frozen river and the sled gained even greater speed. Beneath us the ice shone clear as polished glass. I could see pale shapes trapped within it—stones, bubbles, old currents suspended in crystal. The reindeer ran so swiftly that the banks blurred into darkness, and for several heartbeats I could not shake the sensation that we were not gliding upon the river at all, but flying just above it.

We traveled so fast we outpaced the storm. Soon the river widened and opened onto a vast frozen lake. There the sky revealed itself fully. Never in all my life had I seen the heavens look so alive. The stars were not soft or distant, but sharp as points of silver driven into black iron. Above them moved great ribbons of color—emerald, violet, pale blue—unfurling and curling back upon themselves like banners in some celestial wind. The whole sky seemed to breathe. It did not remain fixed as the sky ordinarily does, but shifted and trembled as though it were conscious of us below.

Time began to lose its shape. Moments stretched wide enough to live inside, yet vanished the instant I tried to hold them. I could not have said whether we traveled for a quarter of an hour or for many days. The night seemed endless, yet also impossibly brief. Hunger faded first. Then fear. Even exhaustion, which had sunk into my bones for weeks, receded until it seemed no more than a memory from another life.

My thoughts slowed. For the first time in many months, they did not attack one another. I simply was.

When we reached the far side of the lake, the figure guided the sled into a forest. Moonlight fell cleanly through the branches and turned the snow blue-white beneath our feet. Every shadow seemed cut with impossible precision. I could hear things I would not normally notice: the hush of fur brushing against fur, the faint groan of trees tightening in the cold.

He provided a wide pair of shoes. Capable of holding my weight upon the surface of the snow, the soft collapse of powder beneath each of my steps when at last we descended from the sled.

He picked up a large leather sack from the sled. Then the great man spoke at last. “There is an elk here,” he said. “A bull.”

His words were few and without ornament, as though this needed no further explanation. He looked at me. “You will kill it.”

I stared at him. In my half-dreaming state the task sounded at once impossible and inevitable. He continued, “You will be patient. The mushroom

will guide you. When the moment comes, you will know.” Then he turned and moved through the trees, and I followed.

Walking no longer felt labored. My body moved with a strange ease, each foot finding its place without hesitation. I became aware of myself in a manner I had never known before, not merely that I had legs and lungs and hands, but how they worked together. I felt the shift of weight from heel to toe, the correction of balance, the rise and fall of breath. My mind did not command these things. It watched them.

At last we came to a mighty oak standing apart from the others like an old king among lesser men. There the figure stopped.

From his sack he produced the spear I had left as an offering hours before, the one the Chieftain had once urged me to use for hunting rather than conquest. Without a word, he handed it to me and motioned toward the branches above.

I understood. Up the great oak I climbed and settled among its limbs, the spear across my lap. Then I waited.

What I saw while waiting cannot be explained as one explains ordinary sight. The snow below me did not appear as one surface, but as countless living crystals, each flake catching the moonlight differently. The drifts and hollows of the forest floor became patterns within patterns, a vast geometry of light and shadow that shifted and folded in upon itself. The bark of the oak swelled and eased as though the tree itself were breathing. I laid my hand against it and felt, or believed I felt, some old pulse moving upward from the roots.

A snowy owl came and settled upon a nearby branch. Its eyes were pale and unblinking. For a long while it looked directly at me, not at my face, but through me, as though weighing whatever part of a man does not belong to flesh. Then, as suddenly as it had arrived, it spread its wings and departed into the dark.

Almost at once, the elk appeared. They moved through the chest-deep snow with an ease that seemed impossible for creatures so large. Their bodies were enormous, all muscle and winter hide, and their antlers rose like branches of a living tree. They passed beneath me one by one, steam rolling from their nostrils into the night air.

I remembered the stranger's command. Be patient. So I let the first bull pass. When the second stepped into range, something in me became perfectly still. I did not decide. I did not think. I simply moved.

I leapt. The spear was already above me. I drove it downward with every remaining ounce of strength in my starved body, and by some miracle, or by the guidance of whatever power had brought me there, it struck true. The bull collapsed with a violent cry, plunging into the snow beneath me. I landed hard in the trail it had broken, but on my feet.

Then from somewhere behind me came a shriek so fierce it raised the hair on my neck. The white-cloaked hunter had thrown back his head and loosed a cry of triumph into the forest, wild and savage and joyous all at once.

He tossed me a dagger. "Quickly," he said. I knelt beside the elk. When I opened its belly, the steam of its warmth rose into the freezing night in a pale shimmering cloud. In my altered state, it seemed to me that something rose within that cloud—something gentle, neither protesting nor afraid. I cannot tell you whether it was truly the spirit of the beast or merely the shape my own mind gave to the moment. I only know that as I watched that warmth leave its body, I felt no sense of theft. Only exchange. The creature had fallen so that my child might live.

And such a beast was far too large to drag whole back through the forest. So beneath the moon, with the great hunter beside me and the smell of blood steaming in the frozen dark, I began the work of breaking salvation into pieces a starving family might carry home.

I had barely begun cutting through the elk when a wolf howled somewhere beyond the trees. The sound carried cleanly through the frozen forest. I stopped. Another answered from farther off. Then another.

The great hunter looked toward the darkness. "They have the scent." I worked faster. My hands were slick with blood, and the cold made my fingers clumsy, but I hacked through hide as quickly as I could. The elk had seemed impossibly large while standing beneath the oak. There was enough meat before me to keep my family alive for months. And I could not carry it.

Another howl came. Closer.

I freed one of the hindquarters and dragged it through the snow toward the Spirit. He took the meat from me. Then he held out the drinking horn. There was still some of the potion inside. I shook my head. My stomach had scarcely recovered from what I had already swallowed.

“Drink.”

“I have had enough.”

“No.”

His voice left little room for disagreement. He pressed the horn into my hands. “Finish it.”

I looked toward the forest.

Something moved between the trees. The Spirit followed my gaze. “If you fear death tonight,” he said, “your wife and daughter will surely meet it instead.”

I stared at him. Then I lifted the horn. The final mouthful was worse than the first. Bitter. Sour. Rancid enough that my body tried to reject it. It took a second attempt to force down.

The hunter took the empty horn from me. Then he lifted the elk quarter onto his shoulder. “You keep them from the carcass.” Before I could ask how, he was already moving toward the sled.

That was when I saw the first wolf. It stepped from between the trees without sound. Gray fur, low shoulders, yellow eyes fixed upon the elk. A second appeared beside it. Then another. By the time the rest emerged, there were six.

They spread around me slowly, their paws disappearing into the snow. None rushed forward. They did not need to. They knew I was alone.

One curled its lips and exposed its teeth. I tightened my grip around the spear. There had been a time, not long before, when I would have fled. I had spent that entire year avoiding the possibility of failure. Every decision I made had been shaped by fear, fear of returning home without enough goods, fear that the elders would judge me, fear that the village would see me as lesser than the man I believed myself destined to become. Standing before those wolves, none of that remained. My only option was to defend the hunt.

The first wolf charged. Time slowed. I watched it happen. I saw its paws strike the snow one after another. I saw the muscles beneath its shoulders tighten before each stride. I saw little crystals of ice scatter from its fur. My heart should have been pounding. Instead, it became steady.

The first wolf lunged toward me as I hurled my spear, striking it directly in the chest. I drew the dagger from my coat as the second engaged. I slit its throat as it dropped in the snow instantly. I turned to find a third upon me. I struck wildly with the dagger twice. The animal collapsed beside me.

Though I was no Norse warrior, my physical actions seemed to come effortlessly as primal instinct. There was no fear. No calculation. No memory of what I had been taught or what I was supposed to do. For those few moments, I was not learning how to survive. I was remembering.

I scrambled to my feet. Three remained. That's when I realized only two wolves stood before me. Before I knew it, I was hit from behind. Claws tore across my back. Its weight drove me face-first into the snow. I felt its teeth gouge into the back of my skull.

With all my might I was able to roll onto my back. I was face to face with the beast. I shoved my forearm against its throat, forcing its jaws away while its weight crushed the breath from my chest.

At that time, the only thought that filled my mind was Flora. I saw Celeste inside the lavvu. I imagined them waiting for me until the fire died. Waiting until hunger and cold finished what the winter had begun. Alone, holding Flora after the little girl's breathing stopped.

That's when my body remembered it was starving. Every last effort of my strength, concentrated on my forearm keeping the wolf's jaws from me, quickly diminishing. I searched desperately through the snow with my free hand, hoping to find the dagger, a branch, a stone—anything. There was nothing.

Then the moon disappeared. A shadow passed over us, eclipsing the moonlight. Something enormous came through the air.

The Spirit struck the wolf with such force that it vanished from above me. I rolled onto my side. What happened next was unlike anything I had ever witnessed. The great hunter moved through the remaining wolves as though he had become part of the storm. There was nothing clumsy or desperate in him. Every movement had purpose. One wolf lunged, and he turned aside before it reached him. Another sprang from behind, and somehow he seemed already to know it was there. His knife flashed. Snow erupted around him. The animals snarled and shrieked. For several moments I could not distinguish white fur from gray, man from beast, blood from shadow. Then it stopped.

The forest became silent again. The Spirit stood among the wolves. His white clothing was no longer white. Blood stained his sleeves, his chest, his gloves. It spread across the pale fur in dark red streaks.

For the first time, I saw what the Norsemen must have seen in him. Not a god. Not a demon. A man who had survived this wilderness long enough to become something both.

He held out his hand. I took it. He pulled me upright. I touched the back of my head and found my hair wet with blood.

The Spirit barely glanced at the wound. "We must hurry."

I looked at the dead wolves scattered around us. "More will come?"

He lifted his eyes toward the forest. "The wolves are not the only hunters here."

When we returned to the sled, I stopped. It stood exactly where we had left it, piled high with as much elk as the two of us had managed to carry. But the reindeer were gone. I stared into the surrounding forest. Nothing. No bells. No tracks I could distinguish among the churned snow. Not a single animal remained.

Panic returned to me at once. "The reindeer." The Spirit continued toward the sled as though nothing were wrong. "Where are they?" He began securing the meat. I looked toward the frozen lake stretching endlessly beyond the trees. "How are we supposed to get home?"

The distance we had traveled suddenly returned to me in full. The lake. The river. The mountains beyond it. Flora lying beneath her blankets waiting for food I had finally found but could never carry back to her on my own.

I grabbed the Spirit by the arm. "Where are the reindeer? How will we ever travel such a distance without them?"

He looked down at my hand until I released him. "I let them go."

"You let them go?"

"The wolves smelled blood." He tightened one of the ropes across the elk meat. "If they had found my animals still bound together in their harnesses, they would have slaughtered the entire herd."

I looked again toward the empty forest. "Then how do we find them?"

The Spirit seemed almost amused by my concern. "We do not."

He raised two fingers to his lips. Then he whistled. The melody was soft and simple. Only a few notes. Yet I knew it immediately. The strange whistle from somewhere among the trees that had sent Musti bounding joyfully toward the forest.

Before I could ask, the Spirit reached beneath his furs. He withdrew two mushrooms. Their caps were brilliant red, scattered with patches of white. I

recognized those as well. Amanita. The same strange mushroom Flora had tried to pick beneath the pine.

“You carry poisonous mushrooms in your coat?”

The Spirit smiled. “Not for me.”

He broke one of the caps apart in his hands. For several moments, nothing happened. Then came the faint sound of bells. I turned. A reindeer stepped cautiously between the trees. Another followed. Then three more. Within moments the forest seemed to come alive with them.

They emerged from every direction, trotting through the snow toward the Spirit. One pushed its nose against his shoulder. Another pawed impatiently at the snow. The Spirit laughed and held the mushroom pieces above their reach. “My pets.”

He passed the pieces among them one by one. The animals devoured the red caps eagerly. I stared. “They eat those?”

“They adore them.”

He produced the second mushroom. The reindeer crowded closer. Watching those great animals jostle one another for pieces of something I had been taught never even to touch seemed almost as strange as anything else I had witnessed that night.

When the last mushroom was gone, the Spirit began fastening their harnesses once more. The animals stood patiently for him. Within minutes, the team was restored as though it had never disappeared. He climbed onto the sled. I followed. The Spirit gathered the reins.

Then the bells rang. The reindeer lunged forward. We raced from the forest and onto the frozen lake, carrying enough meat to save my family beneath the most magical sky I will ever see.

Their bells chimed softly with each stride, and the runners whispered over the ice beneath us. The night remained impossibly beautiful. The aurora folded across the heavens in great curtains of green and violet, while every star appeared sharpened by the cold.

I could still feel the elixir moving through me. The world had not returned to normal. If anything, it had become more real.

Every breath of the reindeer rose in silver clouds. I could hear the leather harnesses stretching with each pull and the faint scrape of the sled whenever the runners crossed a rough patch of ice. Even my own thoughts seemed to

arrive more slowly, one at a time, instead of crashing over one another as they had for months.

For a long while, neither of us spoke. Then I looked toward the man beside me. "What are you?" He kept his eyes upon the path ahead.

A faint smile appeared beneath his beard. "I am Klaus."

"Klaus?"

He nodded. I waited for more.

"The Norse call you a Spirit."

Klaus explained that among his people, those who wished one day to guide others were first expected to learn how little control they truly possessed.

"A man who has never mastered himself has no business ruling another," he said.

The Norse trained certain men as Rangers. They learned to hunt, travel, fight, read the weather, and survive where others could not. Then, when their training was complete, they were sent away.

"Exiled?"

"Chosen exile."

After a time, my attention returned to the reindeer running before us. I remembered the red mushrooms he had fed them. "What were those?"

Klaus glanced toward the herd. "Amanita."

"The poisonous mushroom?"

"To a man, it can be dangerous."

"And yet you feed it to your animals."

"They seek it themselves."

He explained that the reindeer had been eating the red-capped mushrooms long before any Norseman understood why. When they found them beneath the pines, they behaved as children discovering sweets, pawing through snow to reach them and competing for every cap they could find. Klaus had spent years observing them.

The mushrooms affected the animals strangely. They became energetic, playful, sometimes bounding through the snow with an enthusiasm that seemed unnecessary for creatures living in so unforgiving a place. "Man cannot ingest the amanita, but a beast that large can withstand the poison. The reindeer alter what they consume."

I looked toward the horn hanging from his belt. Understanding came slowly. Then suddenly. I turned toward him. "No."

Klaus smiled. "You drank it willingly."

"I believed you were a Spirit."

"And therefore drinking whatever I handed you seemed sensible?"

I stared at him.

He bellowed out in laughter. After his amusement passed, Klaus became serious again.

"The manner in which it is made matters less than what it teaches."

"What did it teach me?"

"That depends upon what you learned."

I thought about the hunt. The wolf standing over me. The tree breathing beneath my hand. The owl staring into me. The moment I threw the spear and there had been no doubt whatsoever about what I needed to do.

"I was not afraid."

"You were."

"You simply stopped listening to your fear."

The distinction stayed with me. Klaus looked toward the stars. "The great burden of man is not hunger. Nor cold. Nor even death."

"What is it?"

"Thought. Thought is what separates us from beasts," he said.

"Then how can it be a burden?"

"The same way fire can warm your home and burn it to the ground."

He pointed toward the reindeer. "They remember enough to survive. They anticipate enough to prepare. But they do not spend the evening regretting what they did in the morning."

His eyes returned to me. "Your dog does not lie beside your daughter wondering whether she has wasted her life."

"Musti."

"Yes. Musti." Something softened in his expression.

"When your dog runs through the meadow, where is she?"

"In the meadow."

"No."

I looked at him.

"She is nowhere else."

The sled crossed beneath another sweep of northern lights. I thought about the year behind me. Even during our happiest summer, I had rarely been there. While Celeste laughed, I thought of the next trade. While Flora played, I thought of the council. While our table overflowed with food, I worried whether the Norse would value what I had prepared. When I lived in abundance I only yearned for more. It was within scarcity I found the things that brought me true joy.

Klaus seemed to hear my every thought. He explained that the Norse warriors traveled to him every month for that reason. Some had returned from raids unable to leave the battlefield behind. Others carried shame for men they had killed or brothers they had failed to save. Their wounds had healed, but their memories had not.

“The flesh knows how to close itself,” Klaus said. “The mind often keeps tearing the wound open.” He looked toward me. “The elixir does not erase what happened to them. Nor should it. Pain sometimes has something to teach.”

“Then what does it do?”

“For a little while, it quiets the storyteller. The voice that endlessly explains what everything means. The voice that says, I should have done this. I must do that. What if this happens? Why did that happen?”

His hand rested upon the reins.

“When that voice grows quiet, a man discovers that beneath all his stories, he is still simply alive. Sometimes a man needs to remember that his life is larger than the worst thing that ever happened to him.”

For a long while after that, I said nothing.

We soon entered back upon the storm. Eventually the lake narrowed back into the river, and the familiar mountains of our valley rose before us.

The reindeer thundered down the frozen river. For the first time in months, I was not thinking about how the story would end. I knew only where I was going. Home.

When we reached the meadow, I leapt from the sled before it had completely stopped. The lavvu was almost entirely buried. Only the smoke opening and the tunnel Celeste had maintained showed that anything remained beneath the snow.

The tunnel leading into the lavvu had nearly disappeared beneath the snow. I could squeeze through it, but the sack of elk would never fit.

Klaus studied the buried entrance, then looked toward the smoke hole above the fire. Without a word, he climbed onto the roof. A moment later, his boots dropped through the opening, followed by the heavy sack. Klaus landed beside the fire carrying enough meat to keep us alive.

Immediately, from it he drew an elk hindquarter. Then, with one violent motion, he snapped the bone across his knee. Celeste gasped. He exposed the marrow within and lowered the broken bone into the boiling water. "The child cannot eat meat." Klaus looked upon Flora laying motionless. "She barely has strength to swallow. That is why you will give her broth." Klaus pointed toward the cauldron. "A little at a time. Do not force it."

When the broth had cooled enough, she gathered a small amount upon a spoon and carried it to Flora's lips. I knelt beside them. My daughter looked so small beneath the blankets. "Flora." She did not answer.

Celeste touched the spoon to her mouth. For a moment, nothing happened. Then Flora swallowed. Once. Barely. But she swallowed. I bowed my head and began to weep. I prayed then. To which god, I cannot tell you. Perhaps all of them. Perhaps none.

I simply begged whatever power had allowed me to return home to let my daughter remain there as well. When I finally looked behind me, Klaus was gone.

I scrambled through the tunnel after him and found him beside the reindeer, fastening the harness. "Wait. The elixir. Give me more."

Klaus stopped.

"For Flora."

"No."

"It gave me strength. You saw what I did tonight."

"I saw."

"Then give it to her."

Klaus turned toward me. "She needs food. She needs warmth. She needs her family beside her." His eyes settled on mine. "But she does not need the elixir."

"Why?"

"Because you needed it to see the world as she already does."

Klaus motioned toward the snow, glowing beneath the moonlight.

"Children do not need us to give them wonder. They already possess it. They live in the world before it has become ordinary. They do not measure

themselves by what they own, or spend their days fearing what tomorrow may bring. They simply see what is before them.”

“As we grow older, fear settles in. Pain leaves its mark. Habit teaches us to stop looking. We begin carrying yesterday with us and worrying over tomorrow, until we barely notice the world beneath our feet.”

“And the elixir?”

“It does not create wonder. It only quiets those things long enough for a weathered spirit to remember.”

Klaus tightened the harness.

“Feed her. Keep her warm. Love her. And protect that part of her for as long as you can.”

He paused.

“That is all a child truly needs.”

“What am I supposed to give her, then?”

Klaus smiled. “Give her nights like this.” He climbed onto the sleigh. “Food. Firelight. Music. Laughter. People who love her.”

Then he reached beneath his cloak. He withdrew the leather sack. The jewels. He held them toward me. For a moment I only stared.

“I threw those into the mountain.”

“And I retrieved them.”

“Why?”

“To see whether you still wanted them.”

I looked at the pouch. Months earlier, I had imagined returning home with those stones held high before the entire village. Now they looked absurdly small. I pushed his hand away. “No.”

Klaus raised an eyebrow.

“The only treasure I need is inside that lavvu.”

He studied me. Then smiled. “Now you may be ready to become an elder.”

“I have failed at nearly everything required of one.”

“That is usually how wisdom begins.”

He tucked the jewels away. Then his expression changed. “There is something I require from you.” I listened. “When the sun returns and the winter releases this valley, you will leave. The man chosen to replace you need not remain here.”

“What of the trading post?”

“We will come north.”

“To our village?”

“Yes.”

He rested his hand against the neck of the nearest reindeer. “These animals will travel with you.”

I stared at the herd. “All of them?”

“All that choose to follow.”

“I know nothing about raising reindeer.”

“They know how to raise themselves.”

One of the animals snorted. Klaus smiled. “Give them open land. Protect them from hunters. Let them wander.”

“And the mushrooms?”

“When the red caps appear, allow the animals to find them. Give them what they seek, and they will seldom wander far from what provides it.” Then his face became serious. “You will preserve what they provide in return.”

“The elixir.”

Klaus stepped closer. “But this knowledge carries danger.”

“Why?”

“Because men confuse a doorway with a destination.”

I waited.

“The elixir can show a man silence.”

He touched his chest.

“It cannot teach him what to do once the noise returns.”

His eyes held mine.

“Some will chase the doorway again and again rather than walk through it and change their lives.”

That warning remained with me.

“So the secret stays with your family.”

“My family?”

“You. Celeste. Flora.”

He looked toward the lavvu.

“And one day, Flora’s children and so on.”

The weight of what he was asking slowly became clear. “The Norse will travel north by ship when the weather allows. They will trade with your village.”

“For the elixir?”

Klaus smiled.

“They will bring generous goods when they know some waits for them.”

Klaus climbed onto the sled. The reindeer shifted eagerly beneath their harnesses. He gathered the reins. Then he slapped them gently against the harness. The reindeer surged forward. The bells rang. I watched Klaus disappear between the trees.

For some time afterward, I could still hear the bells. Then they too disappeared. I stood alone outside the lavvu.

The darkness outside ceased to feel hostile. It felt protective, like a great cloak wrapped around our small world, forcing us to remain close, to remain still. The longest night came and passed. I did not notice it at first. The shift was subtle, almost imperceptible. But one morning, as I stepped outside to gather snow, the horizon held a faint silver line for a few heartbeats longer than the day before.

The sun was returning. It did not burst forth in triumph. It crept. The way Flora’s strength returned. Drop by drop. Breath by breath.

As the days stretched a little wider, color returned to her cheeks. She began to speak again—softly at first. Then she smiled. The first time she laughed, the sound echoed against the frozen meadow like spring itself had whispered into winter’s ear.

I realized then that the solstice was never about the longest night. It was about what survives it. Winter had forced me to sit in the dark long enough to see clearly. All my striving, all my grasping, had been noise. The elixir had quieted my thoughts for a night, but winter had quieted my ambition entirely.

When the sun began its slow ascent, I did not feel triumphant. I felt grateful. The world had not ended in darkness. It had simply paused, reminding us that life is sustained not by gold or status, but by tending to the flame nearest to you.

Flora stepped outside beside me the day the sun finally lingered above the treeline for more than a passing glance. She squeezed my hand. “Father,” she said, “it feels warmer.” The twinkle had returned to her eyes. It was not much warmer. The snow still covered the meadow. The river was still bound in ice. But hope had shifted direction.

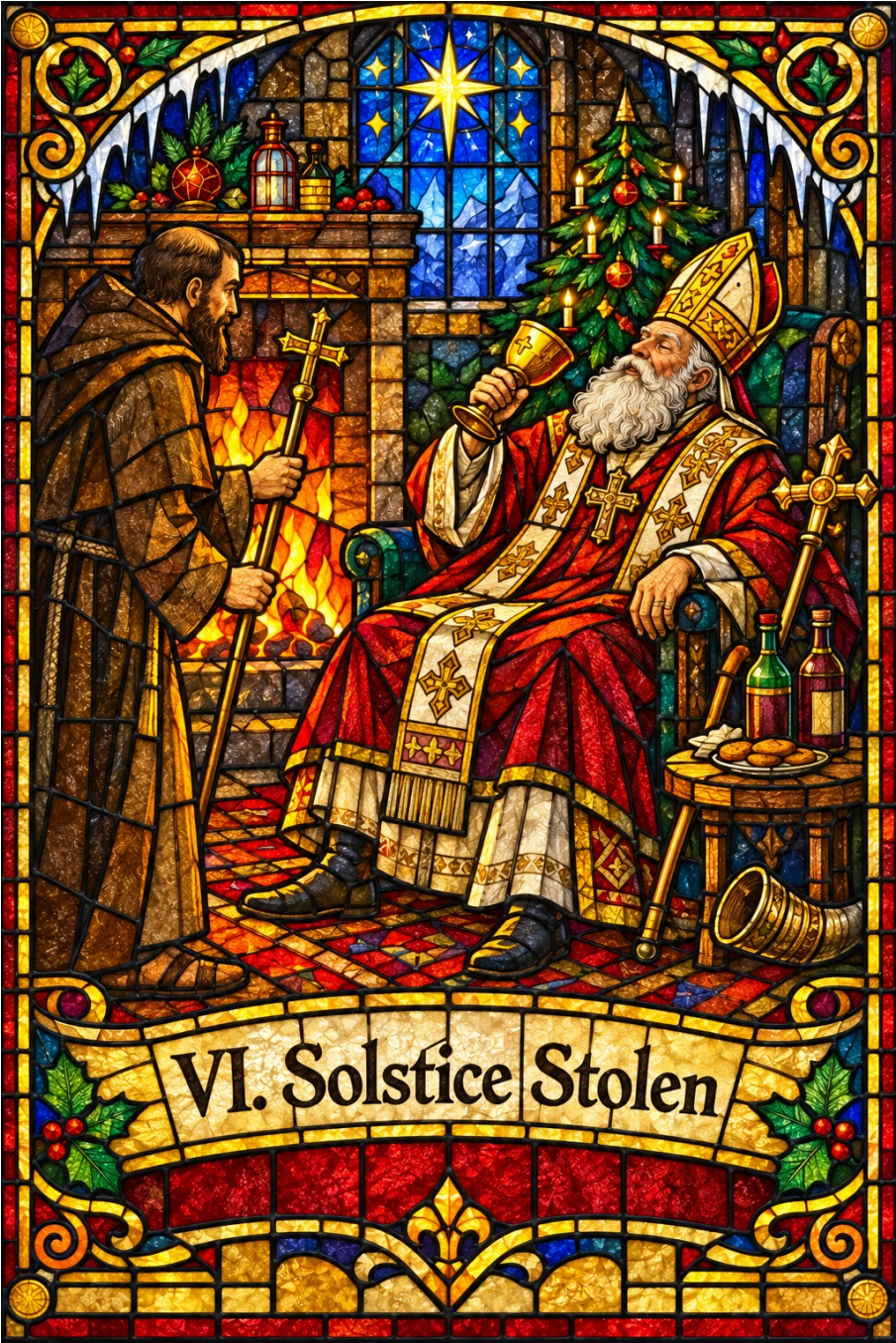
And for the first time since I had taken the post, I had no desire to climb anywhere at all. Winter had given me my family back. And that was enough. When spring came and the new tradesman arrived, he refused to

believe a word of our story, until the reindeer appeared at my whistle. Upon return to the village my story brought skepticism and ridicule. Later, when the Norse ship sailed into our harbor for the first time, the entire village fell silent in wonder. From that day forward, I was no longer an outcast, but an elder.

Upon the conclusion of his story, Father held a Norse drinking horn up high and presented it to the Holy Man. The Holy Man hesitated. He was aware of the fire behind him, the closeness of the space, the unfamiliar quiet now that the drums had stopped. The air felt heavy, as though he had stayed too long in a place not meant for him. He wondered, with sudden unease, whether this was what Gabriel had sent him to face—not repentance or conversion, but participation.

The thought alarmed him. He had come to change them, not to be changed. The realization that he could remain here, that nothing was preventing it except his own resolve, unsettled him more than resistance ever had. Blasphemy, he thought, the word rising automatically. He steadied himself by reciting the first commandment under his breath: I am the LORD your God; you shall have no strange gods before me.

The elder regarded him for a moment, then nodded. “I wish you luck on your mission,” he said. “But I encourage you to live the life you have now, for today and not a legacy of tomorrow. Try to disregard the midnight sun. Sleep well, Holy Man. In the morning, you will be on your way.”



VI. SOLSTICE STOLEN

Francis awoke to the men of the tribe standing outside his lavvu. The morning after the summer solstice had arrived without night. The sun had merely circled the sky in a tireless arc, dipping toward the horizon before climbing again, as though unwilling to abandon the North. There had been no darkness in which to sleep, only a thinning of the light that never fully surrendered.

The Holy Man gathered his belongings beneath their watch. The Sámi men did not crowd him, nor did they speak unnecessarily. Their presence was neither threatening nor welcoming. It was deliberate. They would escort him beyond their lands, and then they would return home.

Francis fastened his satchel across his chest and lifted his staff. The silver crucifix caught the endless sunlight and flashed once before dulling again.

He had come north chasing a star. He would leave beneath a sun that refused to disappear.

Before departing, Francis looked once toward the heavens. Nothing. No Stella Polaris. No constellations. No celestial sign by which to measure his course. The sky that had guided him across Europe was empty of everything but light.

He told himself Rome would understand. The mission had not failed. Not entirely. He had spoken the Gospel. He had baptized no one, built no church, claimed no souls for Christ, but perhaps seeds had been planted. Perhaps another missionary would come after him. Perhaps the people simply required time. Francis repeated these explanations until they almost sounded convincing.

As he passed through the village, for only a second he looked toward Flora's lavvu. Then the Sámi escorted him across the first ridge in silence. From its summit, their village appeared impossibly small beneath the vast northern sky, a scattering of hides beside green hills and silver water. Thin columns of smoke rose from the fires without bending. There was hardly any wind.

At the crest of the second hill, the eldest man stopped. "Our waters are behind you now," he said. "Travel safely, Holy Man."

Francis waited. No blessing followed. No final argument. No plea for him to reconsider what he had witnessed. Only farewell.

Francis inclined his head. Then he turned south. The land changed slowly beneath his feet. The air softened. Grasses grew taller. The sea disappeared behind the hills. With every mile, the sun sank a little farther toward the horizon.

As the days passed, darkness reclaimed the sky. The nights lengthened. Stars sharpened overhead. Familiar constellations returned one by one, and still Francis found no comfort in them.

Yet when Stella Polaris finally emerged again from the gathering dusk, Francis stopped upon the road and stared at it. For months he had walked toward that star. Now it stood behind him.

He recited Scripture while he walked. He repeated the words of Gabriel. He reminded himself of Rome. Of obedience. Of salvation. Of eternal life.

Yet between those certainties came other memories. Father holding out the drinking horn. Francis refusing it. He walked faster whenever that memory returned.

The questions followed. Had Gabriel truly appeared to him? Had the bishop who denied his mission been wiser than Francis had believed? Had God sent him north to convert the Sámi, or had he merely assumed that conversion must be the purpose? And if he had not been sent north to save them, then why had he been sent at all?

There was no monastery, no bishop, no passage of Scripture that could easily answer such questions. But there was one question that belonged not to God, but to a man. Why had Nicholas approved the mission?

When others within the Church had questioned the wisdom of sending Francis beyond Christendom, Brother Nicholas had given his approval with remarkable ease. Francis had accepted it then as Providence. He had been too eager to leave, too convinced of his calling, to question the motives of the man who opened the road before him. Now he questioned everything.

Nicholas alone could tell him why. So Francis did not return directly to his mission in the British Isles. He stopped at diocese after diocese throughout his voyage across Europe inquiring of his old cohort.

Rumors had followed Nicholas through the Church for years. His appetite for wine had grown alongside his ambition, until one threatened the other. Some said his indulgence had embarrassed men within the Lateran. Others whispered that his appointment to the northern lowlands had been less an honor than a convenient exile—a demotion concealed beneath the robes of

advancement. Whatever the truth, Brother Nicholas was now Archbishop of Utrecht.

By the time he reached the city, summer had long since surrendered to autumn, and autumn to the first reach of winter. The northern days that had once refused to end had become distant memories. Darkness now arrived early over Utrecht, filling the narrow streets before evening bells had finished their song.

Francis stood before the Archbishop's residence beneath a cold and starless sky. For months he had carried questions no man could answer. Tonight, he intended to begin with the one that could be.

A newly raised cathedral loomed through the frost, its windows glowing with candlelight, a beacon to the weary traveler. Inside, the nave stood empty. Francis approached the altar, bowed before the cross, and passed through a rear door into the clergy house.

Warmth met him at once. Servants moved briskly through the rooms, carrying baskets of linen, polishing silver, tending fires, and arranging platters for the evening meal. The scent of roasting meat mingled with bread, herbs, and woodsmoke. Somewhere deeper in the house came laughter and the pop of a cork being removed from a bottle of wine.

After months of hard roads and poorer lodgings, the comfort of the place felt almost foreign. Francis stopped a servant carrying a pitcher. "Where may I find Archbishop Nicholas?"

The servant pointed toward the hearth. A man sat in a high-backed chair beside the fire, one boot extended toward the flames. A fur-lined robe rested comfortably across his shoulders, and a silver chalice of red wine sat loosely in his hand. On the small table beside him were bread, cheese, dried fruit, and an open bottle bearing a Roman seal.

Francis approached. "Your Grace." Nicholas turned. For a moment he stared. He could barely recognize the face before him as he sought through memory. Then his entire face brightened.

"Francis?" He rose so quickly that some of the wine spilled over the rim of his chalice. "By God. Francis!" Nicholas crossed the room and embraced him.

Francis stiffened before remembering himself and returned the gesture. When Nicholas stepped back, he held Francis by the shoulders and looked

him over with undisguised amusement. "Look at you. When did you become an old man?"

Francis studied the face before him. Time had silvered Nicholas's hair and filled out his features, but there could be no mistaking him. He still carried himself with the same effortless confidence. The years had been kind to him. His robes were finely made. A jeweled cross hung from his neck. His cheeks held the warmth of the fire and the wine. Nicholas appeared entirely at home in his prosperity.

"Nicholas," Francis said.

Nicholas laughed. He gestured toward the chair opposite his own. "Sit. You look as though Christ himself dragged you across Europe."

"I have questions for you."

"And I have not seen you in...what? Twenty years?"

"Nearly."

"Then your questions have waited twenty years. They can survive another hour."

Nicholas turned toward a servant.

"Wine for Brother Francis. And bring another plate."

"That will not be necessary."

"Nonsense. You arrive beneath my roof looking half-starved and expect me not to feed you? Britain may forgive such hospitality. Utrecht will not."

Francis sat. Nicholas settled comfortably back into his chair. For a time, he spoke with genuine enthusiasm about the years between them. Rome. The Lateran. Bishops they had known. Priests who had risen unexpectedly and others who had disappeared into forgotten parishes. He asked Francis about monasteries he had visited and roads he had traveled, laughing at names and memories Francis had not heard spoken aloud in decades.

"The parish grows," Nicholas continued. "Slowly, but it grows. These northern people are stubborn. Their elders especially. You can baptize a man on Sunday and find him honoring some forest spirit by Tuesday."

He nodded toward the great log burning in the hearth. "They have a custom here during the darkest part of winter. They bring in an enormous log, keep it burning through the night, gather everyone around it, eat until morning, drink whatever they have fermented, and tell stories while the darkness passes." Nicholas took a sip of wine. "I confess, I saw little reason to abolish that particular tradition."

A servant appeared with a platter of roasted meat and vegetables. Nicholas thanked him by name before turning back to Francis. "There are advantages to serving the Church from a cathedral rather than a monastery. Rome taught me that deprivation is not the only path to devotion."

Nicholas seemed neither ashamed of the servants nor embarrassed by the meal before them. To him, the comforts of office were simply part of the office itself. Good wine, warm rooms, fine robes, guests at his table—blessings Providence had placed within reach.

Francis reminded himself that envy was a sin. So was resentment. And forgiveness was not optional merely because the offending man had never asked for it.

He accepted the wine. Nicholas raised his own chalice. "To old friends."

Francis hesitated only a moment before touching his cup against Nicholas's. "To old friends."

They drank.

As the evening lengthened, bottles replaced empty bottles and the formality between them began to soften. Nicholas spoke freely of Rome, Utrecht, difficult nobles, stubborn pagans, and the strange compromises required of a man tasked with governing both souls and men.

There was an ease to Nicholas that irritated him. No awkwardness. No hesitation. No trace that he remembered their last years together differently than Francis did. Francis lowered his eyes to his wine. He still remembered the sermon. Every word of it. Apparently Nicholas remembered only the evening.

But beneath every pleasant memory lay another. A chapel at Cluny. His words spoken in another man's voice. Praise bestowed upon Nicholas for something Francis had created. Years had passed. Francis had prayed over it. Confessed it. Forgiven it as often as forgiveness required.

Yet sitting across from Nicholas now, watching him drink Roman wine beside a roaring fire beneath the jeweled insignia of his office, Francis discovered that forgiveness and forgetting were not the same thing.

And Nicholas, smiling warmly across the hearth, appeared never to have understood there was anything to forgive.

The wine continued to flow. Nicholas drank as though it were water, refilling his chalice without any noticeable change in his manner. Francis was

not so practiced. The warmth that had first loosened his shoulders soon reached his tongue. He began speaking more freely. Then more bitterly.

Nicholas told another story from Rome, some bishop rewarded with an estate for settling a dispute between nobles, and Francis stared into his cup.

Warm rooms.

Fine wine.

Servants.

A cathedral.

Nicholas had remained within the Church and somehow been rewarded for it all. Francis had crossed mountains, slept beneath trees, endured hunger, cold, suspicion, and years of wandering, only to return with nothing he could name as victory. He drained what remained in his chalice.

Nicholas noticed the change in him. "You have hardly spoken of the North."

Francis waved him away. "There is little worth telling."

"I doubt that very much."

"You would."

Nicholas studied him. Francis immediately regretted the words.

"Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive."

That only irritated him more. Francis leaned back and closed his eyes. For a moment he could see the endless northern sun. The sea. The lavvu. Father extending the drinking horn toward him. Flora. He opened his eyes.

"God," he muttered. "Why do you continue to give me challenges?"

The room seemed suddenly quieter. Nicholas set down his chalice. "Francis? Brother, please, tell me of your mission"

"I obeyed Him."

His voice had risen without his meaning it to.

"I went where I was called. I crossed half the world following that damned star. I preached His word. I endured their ridicule. Their suspicion. I did everything that was asked of me."

Nicholas said nothing.

"And for what?" Francis stood too quickly, catching himself against the arm of the chair. "To be sent home with nothing."

Nicholas rose as well, this time without amusement. "Sit, brother."

“I have no church there. No converts. No proof that I accomplished anything at all.”

“Francis—”

“Nothing!”

The word echoed through the room.

Francis lowered his head, ashamed of himself. Nicholas waited. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet. “You did not travel all that way and return with nothing.”

Francis laughed once, without humor.

“No?”

“No.”

Nicholas gestured toward the chair.

“Sit down.”

Francis did.

Nicholas returned to his place across from him but left his wine untouched.

“What happened?”

Francis stared at the fire. For several moments he said nothing. Then, almost to himself, he whispered, “There was a girl.”

“A girl?”

Francis nodded.

“She had died once.”

Nicholas’s expression changed.

“What do you mean?”

Francis looked up at him.

“She told me she had seen Heaven.”

Nicholas remained silent. Francis could feel the story pressing against him now. Months of confusion, anger, wonder, and doubt crowded behind it.

Nicholas spoke gently. “Tell me.”

Francis looked once more toward the fire. Then he began. “Her name was Flora.” In the dim glow of the rectory, with the yule log settling into embers and the servants long since withdrawn, Francis told Nicholas everything. Not merely the shape of the tale. Every word. His memory had always been unusually precise, a gift that had served him in scripture, sermon, and study. Now, loosened by wine, he surrendered himself to it completely.

He repeated Flora's story exactly as she had told it beneath the endless northern sun. He spoke of her childhood among the Sámi. Of hunger. Drought. Musti. The journey into the wilderness. Her body failing beneath the cold. The strange light she had seen beyond death. The figure descending toward her from the heavens.

He then told Nicholas Father's story of Klaus. Of reindeer. Of the mushrooms the Sámi believed opened the veil between their world and the world of spirits. Of the elixir. Of a desperate father carrying food home through the snow. Of a little girl awakening when all who loved her had believed her lost.

Nicholas interrupted only rarely. At first he listened with the polite attention of a host indulging a weary traveler. Then his posture changed. His chalice remained untouched upon the table. He leaned closer to the fire, asking Francis to repeat certain details though Francis assured him there was no need.

He remembered them all.

Francis told him how Flora had grown into the woman he eventually met, still believing that whatever had returned her to life had done so for some purpose she had yet to understand.

Then he told him of Father's proposal. Of the solstice gathering. Of the drums and fire. Of the lessons hidden within the old man's stories. And finally, of the drinking horn. "He offered it to me," Francis said.

Nicholas glanced toward him. "What was in it?"

"You refused?"

"Of course I refused."

Nicholas gave the faintest smile.

"Of course, it was a pagan ceremony. I would not abandon Christ merely because an old man wrapped blasphemy in beautiful words."

Nicholas considered this.

"And yet you have crossed half of Europe to tell me about him."

Francis said nothing and reached for his chalice but found it empty. He set it down again. Only then did Francis realize that somewhere during Flora's story, Nicholas had stopped drinking. Francis had not.

He stared at the man across from him. The question returned. The one question that had survived every mile south.

"Nicholas."

“Hmm?”

“Why did you approve my mission?”

Nicholas’s expression remained unchanged.

Francis leaned forward. “The bishop refused me. Rome had little interest in sending a missionary beyond lands it could scarcely name. Yet somehow you intervened.”

“You remember that?”

“I remember everything.” Francis felt something tighten inside him. “Why?”

Nicholas sighed. Not guiltily. Wearily.

Nicholas looked at him then. For the first time that evening, the warmth disappeared from his face.

“Why did you send me north?”

Nicholas remained silent for several seconds.

Then he said, “Cluny.”

Francis did not move. “You stole my sermon.”

“Yes.” The simplicity of the answer struck harder than denial would have. Nicholas continued calmly. “I was young. Ambitious. I heard something better than anything I had written myself, and I used it.”

“You stood before them and spoke my words.”

“I did.”

“And accepted their praise.”

“Yes.”

Francis felt heat climb into his face.

“And when I requested permission to go north?”

Nicholas looked again toward the fire. “I thought distance might be useful.”

Nicholas gave him a tired look. Nicholas was not defending himself. That somehow made it worse.

“You sent me to the end of the world because you feared I would expose you.”

Nicholas considered the accusation.

“At first?” He nodded. “Yes.”

Francis struck the table with his palm. The empty chalices jumped. “You bastard. You admit it.”

“I have admitted it.”

“Then I will tell Rome.”

Nicholas’s eyes hardened. Then he rose. There was no drunken stumble now. No jovial embrace. He simply stood, straightened his robe, and faced the man he had once studied beside.

“You may.”

Francis hesitated.

Nicholas stepped closer.

“You may travel to Rome tomorrow. You may stand before every bishop who will grant you an audience and tell them that twenty years ago Nicholas of Utrecht delivered a sermon whose words belonged to Brother Francis.”

“They did belong to me.”

Nicholas’s voice remained quiet. “But ask yourself what they will hear. They will see the Archbishop of Utrecht.” Nicholas touched the cross hanging against his chest. “Then they will see you. A missionary who disappeared into the North for years and returned without a church, without converts, without so much as a baptized village to show for it.”

Nicholas paused.

“And now drunk in my house, accusing an archbishop of stealing words spoken decades ago.”

Francis stared at him.

“You think rank makes truth irrelevant?”

“No.”

Nicholas’s gaze remained steady. “I think men decide which truths are worth hearing.” Nicholas stepped past him and stirred the dying log with an iron poker. “For what it is worth, I was wrong.” He watched the sparks rise. “But being wrong and being ruined by it are not the same thing.”

Francis could barely contain himself. “You sent me away to protect yourself.” Nicholas turned. “And you went.”

Silence.

“You believed God had called you north before I ever signed your papers. Do not place the entirety of your life at my feet simply because you dislike where the road ended.”

Francis had no answer.

Nicholas returned the poker beside the hearth.

His eyes fell briefly upon Francis’s empty chalice.

“Sleep.”

“I am not finished.”

“No,” Nicholas said. “I suspect you have not been finished with me for twenty years.”

He moved toward the door, then stopped.

“But if you intend to accuse me before the Church, Francis, do so soberly.” Nicholas glanced back at him. “And decide first whether you wish to expose my past—or explain your own.” Then he left Francis alone beside the dying fire.

Morning came cruelly. Francis awoke in a small chamber of the clergy house with his mouth dry and his head pounding. For several moments he stared at the unfamiliar ceiling, unable to remember where he was.

Then Utrecht returned to him. The wine. Nicholas. The confession. Francis closed his eyes. He remembered every word.

By the time he dressed and descended the stairs, Nicholas was already awake. The Archbishop sat at a long table near the window, breaking his fast with bread, fruit, and watered wine. Whatever excess the previous evening had brought showed little upon him. Francis waited for an apology. None came. Nicholas gestured toward the chair across from him.

“Eat something before you leave.”

“I would rather be on the road.”

“As you wish.”

Francis turned toward the door.

“Francis.”

He stopped.

Nicholas set down his bread.

“Remember your vows. Obedience. Humility. Forgiveness.” Nicholas paused. “They are easiest to preach when they cost us nothing.”

Francis’s jaw tightened.

Nicholas continued.

“You have spent enough of your life wandering. Return to the British Isles. Return to your mission. Serve God where the Church has need of you.”

“And what of last night?”

“What of it?”

“You admitted what you did.”

“I did.”

“And that is all?”

Nicholas held his gaze.

“What more would you have me do?”

Francis had imagined this confrontation for years. In those imaginings there had always been satisfaction at the end of it. An apology. Shame. Justice.

Instead Nicholas rose and approached him. “You cannot change Cluny,” he said. “Nor can you change what happened in the North. You may spend the remainder of your life resenting both, or you may remember the vows you made and continue the work before you.”

It sounded almost like counsel. Coming from Nicholas, it felt like insult.

Francis bowed his head nevertheless. “Your Grace.”

Nicholas smiled faintly. “God keep you, Francis.”

Francis could not bring himself to return the blessing. He departed Utrecht beneath a pale winter sun. He did not argue the Archbishop’s instruction. Obedience had shaped the whole of his life, and obedience would see it through to its end.

He turned westward once more, bound for the British Isles. There Francis lived out the remainder of his years as the Church expected of him.

He preached the Gospel in villages and market towns. He baptized the children of peasants and heard the confessions of their parents. He blessed marriages, comforted the sick, and buried the dead beneath gray stone crosses. He spoke of Heaven with conviction and of doubt only in prayer.

To those who knew him, Francis was a faithful servant of God. But he never again spoke publicly of the North. He told no congregation of Flora. He preached no sermon about Klaus. Those memories belonged to a place within him the Church could not reach.

Years passed.

His hair whitened. His hands stiffened. Villages changed around him. Children he had baptized brought children of their own to receive the same sacrament.

Still, every winter, his thoughts wandered north. He remembered Flora most clearly. Then Father. Then the horn. Of all the choices Francis had made in his life, it was the choice he had not made that troubled him most.

He had called the ceremony blasphemous. Perhaps it had been. He had believed refusing the horn proved the strength of his faith. Perhaps it had. Yet

as the years accumulated, certainty gave way to a question he could never silence. What would he have seen had he accepted it?

He would never know.

Time chased Francis relentlessly. The vigor of youth left his bones. His journeys shortened. His sermons grew quieter. The man who had once crossed seas and mountains in pursuit of certainty eventually required assistance merely to cross the monastery courtyard. He remained faithful to the vows that had governed his life, even as questions he had never answered followed him into old age.

And so the years passed until, at last, Francis lay dying in a small monastery chamber beneath a narrow window.

Night had fallen outside.

A candle burned beside his bed, its flame trembling whenever winter wind slipped through the stone walls. His breathing had grown shallow. Around him came the familiar sounds of monastic life, the distant toll of a bell, sandals moving along the corridor, prayers murmured somewhere beyond the door.

Francis stared through the window.

A nun entered quietly.

She carried herself with the gentle excitement of someone bringing good news to a dying man.

“Father Francis? I thought you would want to know.” She stepped nearer to the bed. “Your old brother from Rome. Nicholas of Utrecht.”

Francis’s expression did not change.

The sister smiled.

“He has been canonized.”

Silence.

“They call him Saint Nicholas now.”

Francis looked past her.

The nun mistook his silence for weakness and continued.

“The Church honors his work among the pagan peoples of the Lowlands. They say thousands came to Christ through his ministry.”

The sister drew the chair closer.

“There are stories about him now. Wonderful stories. They say Nicholas had a special love for children. During the darkest nights of winter, he would leave small gifts for them. Food sometimes. Wooden toys. Little things left

outside their homes for the children to discover in the morning. The children began waiting for him each winter. Parents told them Saint Nicholas watched over the good among them. That if they behaved, he might visit again.”

Francis closed his eyes. Nicholas had done it again. Not the words of a sermon this time. Something far greater. A story. Flora’s story.

The nun rose.

“I thought it might bring you comfort to know that someone you once knew has become a saint.”

Francis gave no answer. She pulled the blanket higher across his chest and quietly left the chamber. The door closed. Francis was alone.

He turned his head toward the sky. There it was. Stella Polaris, The North Star. Francis stared at it as he had stared at it as a young man. As he had on the night Gabriel came to him.

Into a land where, for one brief season, the sun itself had hidden it from him.

All his life Francis had believed the star pointed somewhere. Toward God. Toward purpose. But the star had never moved. He had.

And then, after all those years, he did not ask where it wanted him to go. True north was never a destination. It was a measure of where one stood.

His eyes remained fixed upon the North Star. The realization had come late. But it had come.

And outside the monastery walls, the world continued turning beneath a star that did not.

AFTERWORD

Francis never knew what became of Flora's story. Nicholas carried it into the Lowlands, where the tale of a mysterious traveler from the North slowly became entwined with the memory of the newly canonized saint.

From there, the story traveled as stories always have. From village to village. From parent to child.

Beside hearths glowing against the longest nights of winter. And with every telling, something changed. Klaus became Nicholas. The northern wilderness became the winter sky. The desperate delivery of food became gifts left for children. A suit of red appeared. The reindeer and sleigh remained. So did the wonder.

Centuries passed. Borders shifted. Kingdoms disappeared. Languages changed. In the Netherlands, Saint Nicholas became Sinterklaas. Across the sea, the name became Santa Claus. Elsewhere he took other forms and other names: Father Christmas, Père Noël, Kris Kringle; each culture reshaping the story while preserving something much older beneath it.

For long before any one religion claimed the season, people living beneath northern skies had marked the darkest days of the year. The winter solstice was a turning point.

The sun had reached its lowest path across the sky. The nights could grow no longer. From that moment forward, however slowly, the light would begin its return.

Across cultures and generations, people answered the darkness in remarkably similar ways. They gathered. They lit fires, candles, and lamps. They brought greenery indoors while the world outside appeared dead. They shared food stored from the harvest and sat beside one another while winter narrowed the world beyond their doors.

The fields were frozen. The growing season had ended. The long work of planting and harvest would not begin again for months. For a brief time, life turned inward. Toward the hearth. Toward family. Toward stories.

Religions changed, and the names of the celebrations changed with them, but the instinct endured. The season became Yule, Christmas, Hanukkah, and countless other observances and traditions shaped by different peoples in different places. Some celebrated miracles. Some gods. Some saints. Some simply the return of the sun.

Yet beneath them ran a familiar human desire: to make light when the world was dark.

Perhaps that is why children have always belonged so naturally at the center of the season. Adults decorate trees, hang lights, prepare feasts, exchange gifts, and repeat traditions year after year, hoping to create something magical. But children require very little convincing.

To them, lights already glow brighter. Snow already transforms the world. A fire is still mesmerizing. A story told beneath blankets can still become real.

They do not need an elixir to see wonder. They have not yet lived long enough for repetition to make the extraordinary seem ordinary. And perhaps they need less from the season than adults have come to believe. Not mountains of gifts. Not extravagance. Not endless consumption. Only the certainty that they are loved.

That there is a place waiting for them beside the fire. That familiar voices will gather around the table. That food will be shared. That laughter will fill the room while darkness presses against the windows. That, for one night at least, everyone they love is there.

Eventually the legend of the northern traveler crossed oceans. The starving child disappeared from memory. So did the Sámi fires. The mushrooms. The drinking horn. The old man who understood the meaning of true north. Even Flora's name was forgotten.

But every year, when darkness reaches its greatest length and winter settles across the northern world, children still look toward the night sky and wait for an old man traveling from the North. They wait for reindeer. For gifts. For wonder. For the brief return of a world in which anything seems possible.

And though they no longer know the story of the little girl who nearly died beneath the solstice sun, something of her survived. Not in scripture. Not in doctrine. But in legend.

Because legends are not preserved by remaining unchanged. They survive because each generation finds something within them worth carrying forward.

And perhaps, beneath all the names, religions, decorations, and stories we have placed upon the darkest nights of winter, the message has always been simpler than we imagined:

Stay close.

Share what you have.

Keep the light burning.

And remind the children that the world is still filled with wonder.
For stories, like stars, need not move to guide those who come after them.