
The Spirit
of
Solstice

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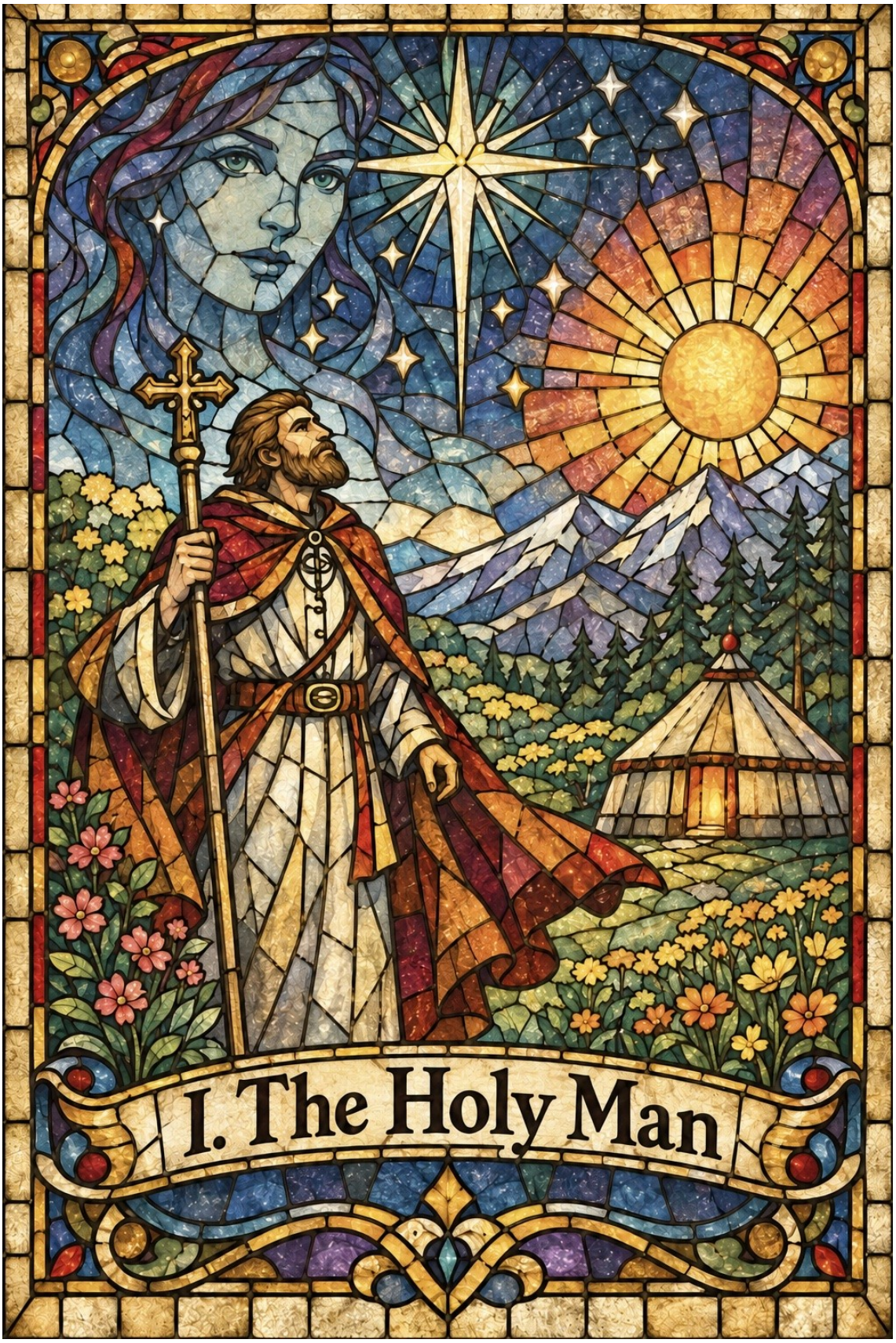
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I. The Holy Man

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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? I have news of your old companion. Nicholas of Utrecht. He 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, "Father? I have news of your old companion. Nicholas of Utrecht. He has been canonized." She smiled, allowing a moment for the news to reach him. "They call him Saint Nicholas now."

Still no reaction. His eyes remained fixed beyond her, through the open window, upon the one star that seemed not to move.

Decades earlier, in a monastery on the northern coast of Britain, the young clergyman sat beneath the same star. He admired the heavenly night sky, searching for answers to his question: *How could the heathens still cling to their pagan gods when Christ had already revealed the way to everlasting life? What earthly pleasure could warrant refusing such a promise? Surely even the most uncivilized man could endure a few sacrifices in this life to be rewarded for all eternity in the next.*

As Francis gazed at the North Star, an angel took shape in its light. He could not have said when his thoughts had given way to the vision, but he knew the figure before him was Gabriel. "Let the North Star guide you 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."

Before Francis could answer, the angel faded. In his place appeared a village upon a lush hillside, followed by the face of a woman more beautiful than any he had ever seen. When the vision passed, he searched the darkness for her face.

Songbirds woke him, for a new day had begun. He closed his eyes, searching for the woman's face, but the dream would not return.

He rushed to the bishop to tell of his vision, but the bishop kindly deflected the eagerness of the youthful seminarian 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, and though no missionary had carried the gospel so far north, he never lost faith. Until one day 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 the signature. He had known Nicholas when they were novices at Cluny, before Rome called one away and sent the other to preach among the villages of Britain. He had spent years confessing the bitterness that rose in him. Yet here was Nicholas granting what no one else would. He folded the letter before old grievances could spoil it.

Whatever passed between them, the road north was open. Perhaps this time he would return with something Rome could not overlook.

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.

The farther north he traveled, the smaller the villages grew. No churches to be found, no bells to be heard, no crosses above the graves. Yet children still played along the shores and families welcomed him to their fires. Even though they shared their food freely, he pitied them, wishing he could offer Christ in return. *Who comforted them in sorrow? What did they believe awaited them after death?* He resisted the urge to preach the gospel, for his mission was clear.

Each night he searched for the star. Each morning he continued north. Each day, night grew shorter, and although the North Star guided his path night after night, his destination seemed no closer.

The sun sat high in the sky as a single traveler approached from the south. A crowd began to gather, mostly women and children, who sat in front of their lavvus watching as the stranger trekked up the lush green hillside. Settling in such a remote region, the villagers were rarely graced with a visitor. As word of the traveler spread throughout the village, the group of spectators grew. Further up the hillside, even a herd of grazing reindeer stopped to observe.

The traveler 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, now worn from the countless miles. Though he was 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 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,” gesturing the sign of the cross. The stranger continued to ask in Latin, “Have you heard

the good news?" He received no reply. The villagers stoically stared back, prompting him to ask the same question over and over in different languages.

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 reassured 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 in the kingdom of heaven. All you have to do is praise the Lord."

The woman answered, "What is it that you want from us, Holy Man?"

The man answered, "My simple wish is that you hear my story."

The woman obliged, and the crowd gathered in the center of the village.

Observing the village was mostly women, he strategically delivered the story of the Nativity, as the woman from his dream translated to the villagers. He came to the resolution that the Magi were called upon to follow the brightest star in the sky, which led them to the manger where the baby Jesus lay swaddled and sleeping peacefully on that silent night. He segued into his sermon by informing the villagers he too was visited by the angel Gabriel. The angel's instructions had led him there.

The Holy Man admitted he did not know where he was going, only following the path of faith. The light of day had lengthened little by little, until three days ago, when the sun never set.

Thus, no star was visible as darkness never arrived. His sermon concluded, “Are you ready to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your own personal savior?”

No one answered. Francis looked from face to face, waiting for a question. At last he turned to the woman. “When will the men 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 others going to 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 elderly gentleman. The message caused the elder to stare directly at the Holy Man. Suddenly, he found himself surrounded by the men of the village.

The men were much less welcoming. 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 message in Old Norse had fallen on deaf ears. The men began to grow aggressive, shouting in their native tongue, but then the surrounding circle parted. The elder of the village shuffled past to meet the stranger. Immediate silence fell over the crowd and tension cleared as the elder spoke in Old Norse, “Traveler, you look weary. I know all too well the burden being away from home can place 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 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 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.

Knowing the maternal nature of the women would embrace the miraculous story of Jesus' birth, he knew the male ego would connect with the story of Jesus' resurrection. Once again, he preached, his elder host translating for the entire village gathered around the fire. 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 fervently proposed that all the village had to do was take the word of the Lord as their own. Accepting the one true God, they would be granted everlasting life, to walk side by side with Jesus in eternal salvation, after their spirits had abandoned their earthly bodies.

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 village, and though the Holy Man took great pride in the delivery of his gospel, the village did not share the same passion. The crowd continued their celebration of the summer solstice. The beat of the 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, watching the flames and turning the day's failure over in his mind.

He did not notice the young woman sit down beside him until she spoke, "Thank you for your stories."

He looked over and immediately recognized 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 are a strong-willed people,” 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.” Then she asked the sullen man, “You think you’ve failed your mission?”

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 weight of 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. But I’m not sure any of it will make sense unless you hear my story.”

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 out. He hesitated. It had been years since anyone had needed to ask. At last he turned back to her. The name felt unfamiliar in his mouth. “Francis,” he said. Then, quieter, almost as though remembering himself, “My name is Francis.”


II. Vernal Equinox

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"Well, Francis, my name is Flora. And these are some of my earliest 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 waters, trapped small game, worked the fields whenever the weather allowed, and took on whatever labor the village required of him.

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

There was one reason Father was the envy of the village. Mother. Everyone said I looked just like her at my age. She was gentle and kind, though beneath her quiet nature lay a stubbornness that even Father could not overcome.

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.

Father would say he was the luckiest man in the village to have her beside him. That is how I remember them most. Not separately, but 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.

For generations, our village had followed an old custom. Each year, one man was chosen to journey east 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.

To become tradesman was considered a great honor. 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.

When I was just a young girl, Father won the lottery for the year. He yearned for the opportunity to provide for the village, to prove himself, and most of all become the youngest man ever invited onto the council.

There was just 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 the Norsemen.

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

Mother reminded him that his duty to the village did not relieve him of his duty to his family. “That creature is more savage than you’ll ever be. The wilderness won’t break her. A year without her father might.”

Flora shook her head at the memory. “He never really stood a chance.”

“So the four of us went together,” Flora said.

Francis interrupted, “Four?”

“Yes, Mother, Father, me. And Musti, of course.”

“Musti?” Francis inquired.

“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. 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 thicket, zigzagging through the trees only to reappear moments later with partridge or pheasant in her jaws. 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 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.

Before Mother had 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 quickly became bored, until he began talking of the Norsemen. He called them Men of the Sea. Great warriors who crossed waters without end in wooden ships, traveling to lands farther away than I could imagine. He spoke of giants with gruesome deformities. 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 into the wilderness just to wait for a band of savages. Then the tradesman showed us what they brought.

Inside the lavvu, he packed up 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, weapons for hunting, and smooth-textured fabrics all far from any place anyone in our village had ever reached. 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. Just as I hit the water, two arms caught me beneath my shoulders and pulled me backward. I thought angels had come to carry me away.

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. It was the tradesman who caught me and planted my feet safely on the ground.”

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.”

That frightened me more than any scolding could have. 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.”

I frowned. Until then, I had assumed spirits had to be one or the other.

“How can it be both?”

He looked once more toward the forest.

“I suppose 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 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. 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. I slowly crept out from behind Mother. The monsters had brought treasures.

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 laughed. “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, clearly impressed. He’d never seen such sorcery. 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. That mattered more to him than any spices or jewels.

Once the trading ended, Mother 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 appetites 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 dawned 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. They spoke of places where trade had been welcomed and others where it had not. Goods were acquired, sometimes through barter, sometimes through beating. Some of the swords, jewelry, and tools they carried had belonged to people who were still living. Others had not.

Father listened to every story. 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. Alas, 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. The Norsemen were gone. Only footprints in the slush and a circle of cold 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. 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

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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 joined along, paddling 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.

Upon their next visit, 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 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 before trading commenced.

Father viewed the wares presented before him. 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."

"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.

"Mead makes a man forget himself. The potion allows him to see what remains when he forgets himself. 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. 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. The flesh knows how to close itself; the mind often keeps tearing the wound open."

"So what does the potion 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? When that voice grows quiet, a man discovers that beneath all his stories, he is still simply alive. He remembers that there is still cold air entering his lungs. Still moonlight upon the snow. Still someone waiting for him at home. Sometimes a man needs to remember that his life is larger than the worst thing that ever happened to him.”

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.

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.

The next morning, 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.

It did not take long for Father to stop 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. “This,” Father declared, pointing toward Mother with his spoon, “is what you will make when the Norse return.”

And soon enough they did. Upon arrival, 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. “What is this?”

Mother looked toward him from beside the fire.

Father took another taste, as though hoping the first had somehow deceived him. Then he stood and marched into the lavvu after her. I followed close enough to hear.

“Where are the mushrooms?”

Mother lowered her voice. “We ate what remained.”

“You said there were more.”

“I thought there were.”

Father stared at her.

“Then you should have made something else.”

“I did.”

Father gestured angrily toward the bowls outside.

"That is what you made?"

Mother's face tightened.

"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. He returned to the feast, appetite ruined, but thirst left unquenched.

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 immediately focused toward the familiar leather pouch he had examined during their previous visits. The chieftain opened it. From where I stood, I could see flashes of red and green catching the sunlight as Father sifted through its contents.

The chieftain looked toward Father's stack of furs and said something I could not hear. Father hesitated, but only briefly.

Then he shoved the entire bundle toward him. The Norseman gathered all 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. "For any of it?"

Father turned on her. "What did you expect after that meal? I spent the whole summer building our stores, and you served them boiled turnips."

"It was all we had."

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 slumber.

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

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, my feet catching on roots and stones 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 one 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. I could hear its hooves bound 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 hooves.”

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 and claws,” 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.

I turned toward the field. There he stood a short while later, 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. Soon, 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. When the Norse failed to return, he took their absence as confirmation of his greatest fear: without something worthwhile to offer them, his duty as tradesman had become a failure.

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. With winter waiting just beyond the shortening days, our stores were dwindling and there was little time left to replenish them.

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

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Summer in the valley was short. 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. Most noticeable of all was the returning darkness. After a summer when daylight had seemed endless, night now arrived earlier with each passing evening.

Father greeted the Norse with enthusiasm. On this visit, 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 looked him over before reaching among the other goods and lifting a long-handled spear. “This would suit you better.” The chieftain handed it to him. “If you truly need to defend yourself, you would have a better chance keeping danger at a distance after what you just showed us.”

“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.

“That is a weapon a hunter can use.”

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

“What will you take for it?”

The chieftain gestured toward a single stack of furs. “That will do.”

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.

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. Father stood beside the lavvu waiting for them, already anxious over what little we had to offer. I watched them descend the ridge in their familiar single file, dark figures against the fading autumn sky. At first, I scarcely noticed him. There was something moving beside the chieftain. Small. Black. Trotting faithfully at his heel. 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."

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." Then I looked back at the chieftain. "But how did you save her from the beast?"

"The beast?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"The terrible beast in the forest! It had great horns upon its head, long claws, and a mouth full of sharp teeth!" I conjured up the evilest impression I could: curled my fingers into claws, bared my teeth, and let my tongue dangle from my mouth in a hideous imitation.

The chieftain was not bothered by my performance. “You needn’t frighten yourself, child. The Spirit of the mountain found Musti and tended to her wounds.”

“But I saw it!” I protested. “It was an evil spirit!”

The chieftain’s smile faded. He glanced toward the darkening forest, then back at me. “Perhaps,” he said. “But who is to say there is only one spirit in these woods?”

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.”

The Norsemen laid out their wares across the meadow. He moved through the goods without enthusiasm: no sparkling gems, no exotic weapons. They only carried tools and common goods. Which was fine, because Father hadn’t much to offer himself.

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 chieftain showed little sympathy.

“We will ask the gods for rain.”

Father scoffed. “Rain?”

The chieftain looked toward the darkening sky. 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. 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. Musti curled beside me, and I rested my hand upon her back as though afraid she might disappear again if I let go.

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.

Inside, the Norsemen gathered around the fire. The chieftain raised his drinking horn. The men lowered their heads. “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 were no stories, no laughter, no boasting, no drunken singing. 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. 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. 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.”

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. 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!"

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 harder than I had heard him laugh in months.

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. 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. Pieces of fencing, 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.

"No," Mother pleaded.

The supporting poles shifted. The whole structure folded into the rushing water and disappeared downstream. 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.

From that morning forward, silence settled over our family in a way the floodwater never could.

Yet the rain had brought one mercy. The river ran deep again and with its current returned the fish. 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 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 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.

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. 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.”

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 pointed at me. “Today is not an adventure. You stay beside me and keep pace. And most of all, when I tell you not to touch something, you listen.”

I nodded eagerly. “I will.”

The forest had changed since summer. Most of the leaves had already fallen, leaving the branches bare above us. The ground was wet from the flood, and every step sank softly into layers of dark leaves and mud. What little warmth the sun provided in the meadow disappeared beneath the trees.

Father checked several traps along the way. All were empty. The flood had scattered much of the small game, and whatever had survived seemed to have followed the larger animals south or farther down the valley in search of food. 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 chanterelles, 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, 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.

It was still there. At least, I thought it was. But 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.”

I did not entirely understand what she meant. At the time, I only cared that the coat was warm and that Mother seemed pleased with our harvest.

That evening, she added the chanterelles 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.

The animals disappeared with it. Father's traps remained empty. The rabbits had gone to ground. Birds that had filled the trees during summer were nowhere to be heard. Even the larger game seemed to have abandoned the valley or settled somewhere beyond Father's reach.

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.

He stopped announcing himself when he came home. Mother stopped asking what he had found. The answer was almost always the same. Nothing.

Father would hang his bow beside the entrance, 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.

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 they only reminded me 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. 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. 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."

Through the entrance, I saw the chieftain raise his hand toward the mountain peak. "The Spirit."

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

The chieftain lowered his arm. "That depends upon what you are willing to give. 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 began to dream of 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. 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. "Soon after was when I saw the heaven you spoke of. 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, but 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. And then an angel came for me."

Francis straightened.

"I remember seeing him descend toward me from the heavens. 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.

"For many years, I believed your God had sent him to save me. 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 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?"

"A woman chosen by heaven to bear a child when no ordinary explanation could account for it. 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." The words hung between them.

"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. His gracious host, the village elder, 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?*

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

"Good night, Flora."

Francis's gaze continued on Flora as she returned to her lavvu for the darkless night.

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

“Promises?”

“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. 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.” Francis leaned forward. “What happened after she lost consciousness?”

For a long while, the elder stared into the fire. Then he lowered himself more comfortably beside it. “What happened next will do little to help you convert our people. But perhaps it will give your journey here a different purpose.”

Francis said nothing more.

The elder drew a slow breath. Then he began.


V. Winter Solstice

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.

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

"He spoke of a spirit of the mountain. He said that if I seek its mercy, I must bring an offering."

Celeste looked around the lavvu. There was almost nothing left. A few blankets. Some tools. The iron cauldron. A handful of dried food Celeste had been stretching farther than food ought to stretch. "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.

“You have had those this entire time?”

I lowered my eyes.

Her voice rose.

“Through the drought?”

I said nothing.

“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.”

“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. You are not worthy of a place among the elders. You are hardly worthy to call yourself her father.”

I had not been spoken to that way since I was a boy standing before my own mother. I looked at Flora lying beneath the blankets.

Celeste began gathering what remained of our belongings.

She placed them inside the great iron cauldron I had once traded for during the summer, a 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.

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. 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. 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. So I followed them.

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. Whatever courage brought me that far vanished when I imagined meeting the creature that had made those tracks somewhere beyond the reach of daylight.

“Spirit!” I called. My voice traveled into the cave. A moment later it returned to me. Spirit.

Spirit.

Spirit.

“I do not know whether you are a god, a beast, or nothing more than a story told by frightened men. 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.

Then I told it the truth I had been avoiding. None of those things were why my family was dying. 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. 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.

They were suffering because I had been too proud to leave. Because I could not bear to return home a failure.

For the first time, I saw plainly what I had become. 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.

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.

I drew back my arm and threw the pouch into the cave.

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 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.

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.

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.

Not the ringing of metal hammered by men, but a looser, stranger sound, 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, not as wandering animals but harnessed 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. I sought refuge in the tunnel. He stepped from the sled up to 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 towered over me silently, as though measuring whether I spoke the truth.

Then he reached behind him and lifted something from the sled. My cauldron. 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.

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

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, and yet not wholly hostile.

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 for several heartbeats I could not shake the sensation that we were not gliding upon the river at all, but flying just above it.

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, 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. You will kill it.” 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.

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. 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 the white-cloaked hunter 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.

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. 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.

“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. Rank enough that my body tried to reject it before I forced it 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. I tightened my grip around the spear. There had been a time, not long before, when I would have fled.

Standing before those wolves, none of that remained. I did not care what anyone thought of me. I did not care whether I ever returned to the village. I did not care whether anyone remembered my name. There was only Flora.

The first wolf charged. Time slowed. 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. I drew back the spear. The wolf leapt. I threw. The spear crossed the space between us and struck the animal before it reached me. It fell hard into the snow.

The others reacted instantly. Two rushed from opposite sides. I drew the dagger. One lunged. I turned and drove the blade beneath its chest. Its weight carried us both into the snow. Before I could stand, the second was upon me. I rolled aside and felt its teeth snap shut beside my face. I struck wildly with the dagger. Once. Twice. The animal collapsed beside me. I scrambled to my feet.

Three remained.

For one impossible moment, everything became silent. Then I realized there were only two in front of me. I never saw the third.

It hit me from behind. Its weight drove me face-first into the snow. Claws tore across the back of my head. White light flashed before my eyes. I screamed and rolled onto my back. Its paws struck my chest. Its jaws opened above my face. I reached for the dagger. It was gone.

I clawed blindly through the snow beside me. Nothing. The wolf snapped at me. I shoved my forearm against its throat with both hands, forcing its jaws away while its weight crushed the breath from my chest.

For the first time that night, fear returned. Not fear for myself. I saw Celeste inside the lavvu. She was holding Flora after the little girl's breathing stopped. I imagined them waiting for me until the fire died. Something inside me refused the thought.

I had failed them every day since summer. I would not fail them now. I struck the wolf with my fist. It barely reacted. I struck it again. Its claws dug deeper into my coat.

I searched desperately through the snow with my free hand, hoping to find the dagger, a branch, a stone, anything.

There was nothing.

So I grabbed the animal. My fingers buried themselves in the thick fur around its throat. I pulled. I pushed. I screamed into its face like some wild thing myself.

The wolf snarled and fought against me. Its teeth descended.

Then the moon disappeared. A shadow passed over us. Something enormous came through the air. The Spirit had returned.

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. I could not distinguish white fur from gray, man from beast, blood from shadow.

Then it stopped.

The forest became silent again. I remained on my back in the snow. The Spirit stood among the wolves. Blood stained his sleeves, his chest, his gloves. It spread across the pale fur in dark streaks that appeared almost black beneath the moon.

“We must hurry,” he instructed.

“More will come?”

“The wolves are not the only hunters here.”

We carried as much meat as we could and returned to the sled. 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. 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. 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.

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

“You carry poisonous mushrooms in your coat?”

The Spirit smiled.

“Not for me.”

He broke one of the caps apart in his hands.

At first nothing. I began to panic.

Then a reindeer stepped cautiously between the trees. Another followed. Then three more.

They emerged from every direction, trotting through the snow toward the Spirit with none of the hesitation they had shown during our hunt. 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.

"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. 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.

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. "Who are you?"

"You have asked me that already."

"And you have yet to answer."

A faint smile appeared beneath his beard. “I am Klaus.”

I waited for more. “The Norse call you a spirit.”

“The Norse call many things spirits when they do not understand them.”

“Then why do you live out here alone?”

“Among my people, I was trained as a warrior. There was no greater honor. I learned to hunt, to fight, to endure hunger and cold. In time, I hoped to lead.”

“What happened?”

“A man who has never mastered himself has no business ruling another.” He paused in silence. “I came here to learn what my training had left untaught. When to act. When to wait. How to tend something without demanding that it serve me. Someday, when the time comes, I will return to my people as someone they can depend on.”

“How will you know when the time comes?”

Klaus smiled beneath his beard. “When I have more to offer my people than a sword.”

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. 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. I turned toward him. “No.”

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.”

Klaus was silent, then asked, “During the hunt, your mind was only focused on the task in front of you: killing the elk, slaying the wolf. Even when you faced death, where did your thoughts go in that instant?”

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. I envisioned the wolf, its paws on my chest pinning me to the ground.

“My only thoughts were on my family. Of Flora, of Celeste, alone in the lavvu. Nobody to provide for them.”

“Well then, that is what the elixir taught you.”

For a long while after that, I said nothing.

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. I had spent abundance fearing scarcity. Then spent scarcity remembering abundance.

Eventually the lake narrowed back into the river, and the familiar mountains of our valley rose before us. Somewhere beyond those mountains was our meadow. Somewhere beneath the snow was our lavvu. And inside it lay my daughter. Alive, I prayed.

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.

I crawled inside. Celeste was kneeling beside Flora.

She turned. Her face went pale. She rushed toward me. “Are you hurt?”

I had forgotten how I looked. My clothes were torn from the wolves. Blood had dried into the fur around my shoulders and down the side of my face. My scalp still burned where the animal had clawed me. And yet the answer came without hesitation.

“No, my dear.

“I have never felt more alive.”

Before she could decide whether I had lost my mind, something fell from the opening above us. A great red shape dropped through the smoke hole.

Celeste screamed.

For only an instant, the commotion startled Flora from her comatose state. At least I knew she was still alive.

Klaus landed beside the fire carrying his sack. 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. She barely has strength to swallow. That is why you will give her broth.”

Klaus pointed toward the cauldron.

When the broth had cooled enough, Celeste 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. Nothing happened. I feared the worst. 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. 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, reins in his hand.

"Wait! The elixir. Give me more."

Klaus stopped and looked down at me.

"For Flora," I pleaded.

"No."

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

"I saw."

"Then give it to her."

Klaus turned toward me. "Flora does not need it."

"She is dying."

"The child needs food, needs warmth, needs her family beside her. 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. "To you, this is winter. To Flora, every flake is something worth catching on her tongue. You hear bells and think of reindeer that must be harnessed. She hears them and wonders where they are going. You see a fire and think of warmth. She sees dancing light. Children do not need us to give them wonder. They bring it with them."

“Then why did the elixir work on me?”

Klaus answered, “Time. As we grow older, we become concerned with what we own, what others think of us, what tomorrow may bring. Before long, the world becomes ordinary.”

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

“Give her nights like this. 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.

“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. 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.

“There is something I require from you. When the sun returns and the winter releases this valley, you will leave. The man chosen to replace you will not remain here.”

“What of the trading post?”

“It has served its purpose.”

"And the Norse?"

"We will come north. Trade will commence at your village."

He rested his hand against the neck of the nearest reindeer.

"These animals will travel with you."

"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. When the red caps appear, allow the animals to find them."

"The Amanita."

He nodded. "Give them what they seek, and they will seldom wander far from what provides it. You will preserve what they provide in return."

"The elixir."

"Yes."

"For your warriors?"

I remembered the solemn ceremony I had watched during the equinox.

"The nights they come to you. For the elixir?"

"For perspective. The elixir does not erase what happened to them. Nor should it. Pain sometimes has something to teach.

"But this knowledge carries danger."

"Why?"

“Because men confuse a doorway with a destination. The elixir can show a man silence.” He touched his chest. “It cannot teach him what to do once the noise returns. Some will chase the doorway again and again rather than walk through it and change their lives.

“So the secret stays with your family.”

“My family?”

“You. Celeste. Flora. And one day, Flora’s children.”

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.

It was only then that I noticed. A faint light glowing on the horizon. The longest night came and passed. 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.

I realized then that the solstice was never about the longest night. 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 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.

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.

The village elder then held a Norse drinking horn up high. “For years, I dreamed of returning to that village a man they would admire. When the time came, I was grateful simply to bring everyone home.”

Then he offered it to the Holy Man.

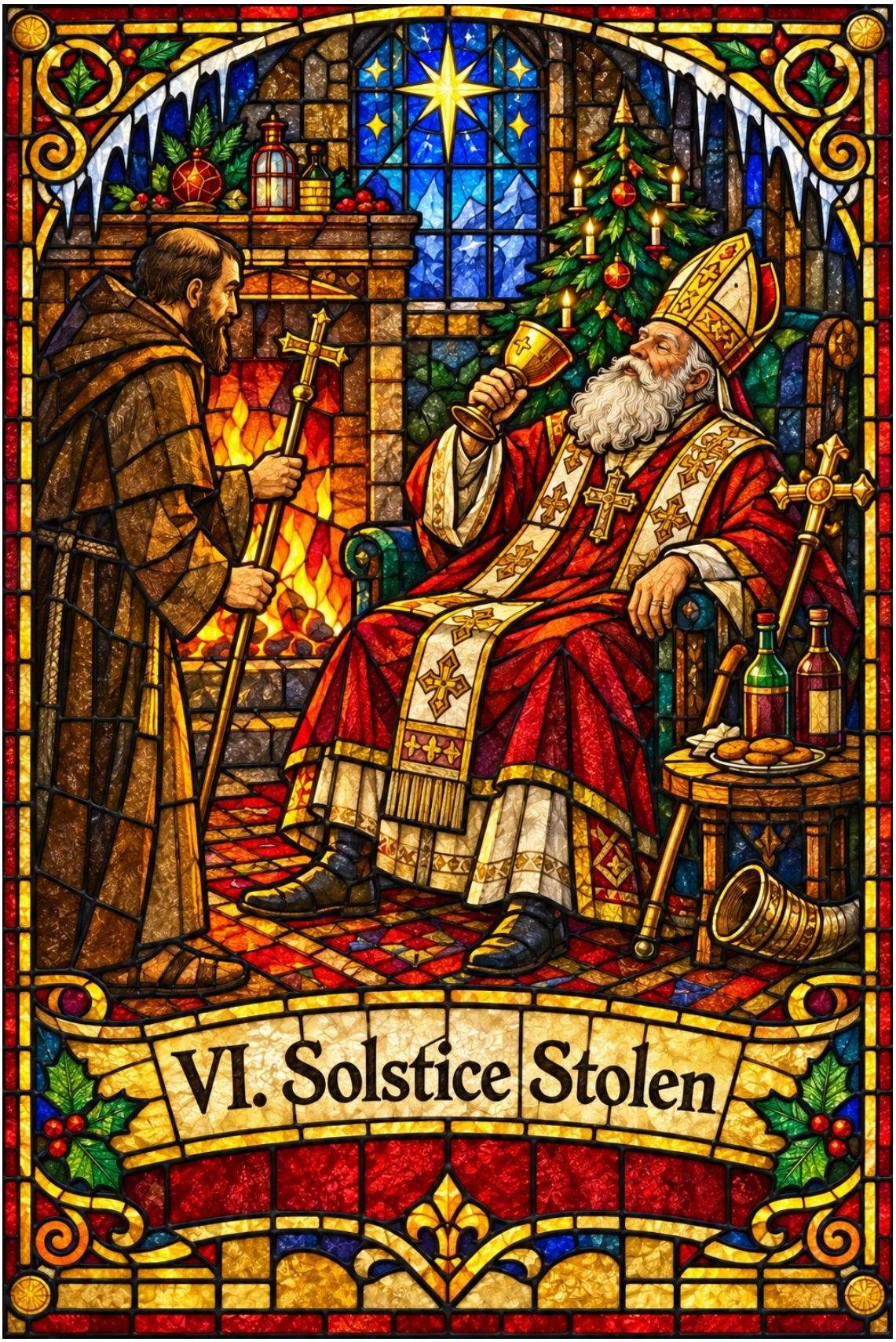
“Tell me, Holy Man. If you spent your life doing good, but no one ever remembered your name, would that be enough?”

The Holy Man hesitated. 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. 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

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Francis awoke to the men of the tribe standing above him around a now smoldering fire. 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 men did not crowd him, nor did they speak unnecessarily. Francis fastened his satchel across his chest and lifted his staff. The silver crucifix caught the endless sunlight and flashed once before dulling again.

Before departing, Francis looked once toward the heavens. Nothing. No Stella Polaris. 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. Perhaps another missionary would come after him. Perhaps the people simply required time. Francis repeated these explanations until they almost sounded convincing.

Francis was escorted through the center of the village. His head remained on course with what was ahead of him, but his eyes could not help but stray. His gaze searched for Flora as he walked past her lavvu. With no such luck, he was not allowed any hesitation by his escorts.

His escorts followed him across the first ridge in silence. Then at the crest of the second hill, the eldest man stopped. “Travel safely, Holy Man.” No blessing followed. No final argument. No plea for him to reconsider what he had witnessed. Only farewell.

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.

At first Francis welcomed the returning darkness. Night was familiar. Night brought stars. Night restored the heavens to an order he understood.

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 turned south again.

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.

The questions followed. *Had Gabriel truly appeared to him? Had God sent him north to convert, or had Francis merely assumed that conversion must be the purpose?*

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?*

Earlier, 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.

During his travel south, Francis had plenty of time to recall the past.

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. Francis 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 for you 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 themselves, Nicholas understood the power of performance. Knowing his brother'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 brother wrote with thunderous conviction.

Francis 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. The runner-up was awarded a mission in the British Isles, tasked with converting pagans on the fringes of Christendom.

For a decade, he lived as the Church demanded: poor, obedient, tireless. Serving the destitute, spreading the Gospel among Anglo-Saxons and Celts, and asking 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.

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. And Francis intended to find him.

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 the Archbishop?”

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 and stared. 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 Francis remembered from Cluny. 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. “No one has called me that in years.” 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? A decade?"

"Nearly."

"Then your questions have waited for 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. 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.

"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. They refer to the celebration as Yule." Nicholas took a sip of wine. "I confess, I saw little reason to abolish that particular tradition. I simply civilized it with a blessing of the wine."

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 raised his own chalice. "To old friends."

Francis hesitated 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. For a time, Nicholas 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 nearly a decade.

Francis listened. Occasionally he laughed. Occasionally he even remembered why he had once liked Nicholas. 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.”

Francis immediately regretted the words. “Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive.”

That only irritated him more. Francis leaned back and closed his eyes.

He could see the endless northern sun. The sea. The lavvu. Father extending the drinking horn toward him. Flora.

Francis stood too quickly, catching himself against the arm of the chair. “God,” he called to the sky. “Why do you continue to give me challenges?”

The room seemed suddenly quieter.

Nicholas set down his chalice. “Francis?”

“I obeyed Him. 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. And for what?”

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.”

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?”

“She had died once.”

Nicholas’s expression changed.

“What do you mean?”

“She told me she had seen Heaven.”

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’s gaze never strayed from the fire. “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.

At first Nicholas 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.

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. 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?”

“I did not ask.”

“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. The fire cracked between them.

Francis 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, why did you approve my mission?” he demanded. “The bishop refused me. Rome had little interest in sending a missionary beyond lands it could scarcely name. Yet somehow you intervened.”

The words hung between them.

Nicholas sighed. Not guiltily. Wearily. “Must we do this tonight?”

“Yes.”

“You are drunk.”

“And you are avoiding me.”

Nicholas looked at him then. For the first time that evening, the warmth disappeared from his face. Then he said, “Cluny… You never confronted me.”

“I took vows.”

“That was not what I said.”

Francis’s jaw tightened.

“You stole my sermon.”

“Yes.”

The simplicity of the answer struck harder than denial would have.

"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 rose.

Nicholas did not.

"All these years—"

"All these years what?"

"You knew."

"Of course I knew."

Francis felt heat climb into his face. "And when I requested permission to go north?"

Nicholas looked almost puzzled by the question. "I thought distance might be useful."

"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."

Nicholas's eyes hardened.

Francis immediately heard the word as though someone else had spoken it. He turned away, breathing heavily.

"Forgive me."

Nicholas gave a humorless laugh. "There is the Francis I remember."

Francis turned back.

“You admit it.”

“I have admitted it.”

“Then I will tell Rome.”

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

“They did belong to me.”

“I know.

“But ask yourself what they will hear.”

Francis said nothing.

“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 and returned without a church, without converts, without so much as a baptized village to show for it. And now drunk in my house, accusing an archbishop of stealing words spoken long ago.”

“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. Nicholas watched the sparks rise. “For what it is worth, I was wrong. But being wrong and being ruined by it are not the same thing.”

"You sent me away to protect yourself."

"And you went. 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, Brother."

"I am not finished."

"No," Nicholas said. "I suspect you have not been finished with me for ten years. But if you intend to accuse me before the Church, Francis, do so soberly. 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. He stared at the unfamiliar ceiling, unable to remember where he was.

Then Utrecht returned to him.

The wine.

Cluny.

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, with bread, fruit, and watered wine. Whatever excess the previous evening had brought showed little upon him.

"You look terrible."

Francis ignored the remark. 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. 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?"

"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 there was only morning.

"You cannot change Cluny," Nicholas reminded. "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.

In many ways, he was.

But he never again spoke publicly of the North. He told no congregation of Flora. He preached no sermon about Klaus. He made no mention of reindeer flying beneath the solstice sky, of mushrooms that opened doors between worlds, or of an elder who had offered him a drinking horn beside a fire. 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. He had believed refusing the horn proved the strength of his faith. Yet as the years accumulated, certainty gave way to a question he could never silence. *What would he have seen had he accepted it?*

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. Still, he served. He remained faithful to the vows that had governed his life, even as questions he had never answered followed him into old age.

So the years passed and Nicholas's love of wine left him fewer than he might have known. Francis outlived him many years over until, at last, Francis lay dying in a small monastery chamber beneath a narrow window. 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 as a nun entered quietly. She carried herself with the gentle excitement of someone bringing good news to a dying man.

“Father Francis? I have news of your old companion. Nicholas of Utrecht. He has been canonized.” She smiled, allowing a moment for the news to reach him. “They call him Saint Nicholas now.”

Francis remained still.

“The Church honors his work among the pagan peoples of the Lowlands. Thousands came to Christ through his ministry. They say the elders would scarcely listen to him at first. But he found a way to reach their children.

“On the longest night of the year, he went among their houses in secret. Bread for the hungry. Wooden swords for the boys. Dolls for the girls. Little gifts left where the children would find them when they woke.

“No one saw him come or go. There were stories of a spirit from the North, traveling through the snow with reindeer. The children wanted to know who he was. At the church, Nicholas told them of the Lord whose servant had remembered them.

“Each winter they waited for him. Their parents told them he watched over the good children, even when they could not see him. Soon the children were bringing their families to hear Nicholas preach. There was scarcely room for them all.

“Some of those boys grew into men who took up the cross and went to war in the Lord’s name. The girls became mothers who taught their children Christian prayers.

“When word reached Rome, other bishops were encouraged to follow his example. Now the custom is spreading beyond the Lowlands. Each winter, more children hear his story.”

His lips parted. The sister paused, but whatever he might have said remained beyond his strength.

“Think of it,” she said gently. “His work continues even now. Generations will know his name.”

Francis looked past her toward the window. He gave no answer.

She pulled the blanket higher across his chest and quietly left the chamber. The door closed.

Nicholas had done it again. Francis waited for the familiar anger, but there was no more energy for resentment.

The candle burned low. Somewhere beyond the door, sandals brushed the stone halls, then faded. Francis kept his eyes upon the star until it blurred.

He had followed it across a continent, certain that somewhere beneath it God had prepared the life for which he was intended. Francis waited for the familiar ache of all he had left unlived, but there was no more energy for regret.

All his life Francis had believed the star pointed somewhere. Toward God. Toward purpose. Toward some distant place where certainty waited to be discovered. But the star had never moved. He had.

For the first time in his life, 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.

His eyes grew heavy, and for a little while the chamber loosened its hold upon him. He traveled back, to a place familiar, to a life unlived.

There was a fire. Flora sat beside it, lifting her face as he entered. A child leaned against her knee, then rose and came toward him. He could not quite see the child’s features, but he felt

the small weight settle into his lap. Someone had left a bowl for him near the embers. Nothing remarkable had happened. He had simply come home.

Father's words returned: *tending to the flame nearest to you.*

At the toll of the morning bells, the sister returned and found him still facing the window. Believing he had died comforted, she closed his eyes.