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BOTH EYES OPEN



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“Nothing good ever comes from the North,” my father told me when I was five. I had been out playing that day near our longhouse, in snow up to my ankles. I had been racing my friend Bjorn to the old god tree, an ancient rowan on the hill with Freya’s face carved into it.

I reached the tree and was giddy with excitement at winning. I dared not climb, for the tree was sacred, when I heard a yelp of, “Odin!”

I turned back to see a huge wolf, dusky gray, with dark yellow eyes, its teeth gripping Bjorn’s throat. It was a she-wolf, with sagging nipples and a haunting hunger in her eyes, and a stance that said, “Do not try to separate me from my prey.”

“Let him go!” I shouted, and charged the wolf, hoping to drive it away, knowing it was almost certain death.

The wolf watched defiantly, holding Bjorn down with a paw, as it choked the life from him. He struggled almost not at all. I searched the snow-covered ground for a rock to throw, but the wolf lifted Bjorn and triumphantly bore my best friend away. Almost, she danced.

That night, as wolves howled in glee beneath a full moon, it made my skin crawl and sent shivers down my spine into my gut. I imagined Bjorn wailing among the wolves.

My father was a beast of a man who spent most of the year in his longboat, letting the wind bear him from raid to raid. When my father asked, “Did Bjorn die well?”, it did not matter that Bjorn was extraordinarily courteous or that he was good at finding agates. I knew what my father wanted.

“Yes,” I answered, “he fought the wolf bravely.”

“Well,” Father tried to comfort me, “then he died a warrior, and now must be feasting in Valhalla.”

My grandmother was a wise woman. She peered in my eyes and I think she perceived the truth. She saw my fear, so all night she beat a drum for Bjorn and went into a trance. In the morning, she pronounced to the menfolk, “That she-wolf was the chief of her pack. We must kill her and let Odin wear her pelt. That way, wolves will respect him.”

So, my father followed the wolf’s tracks in the snow and found the she-wolf’s den. She was in a stupor, drunk on meat and blood after eating Bjorn, so father easily slew her and gave me two of her pups along with the pelt.

Grandmother was right: when I wore my wolf coat, wolves respected me. They knew the scent of their master.

But not all things from the North were evil, I learned. It was not just storms that swept in like owls on icy wings, or wolves that howled at night, or marauders that hiked over ice-crusted fjords.

That winter during the time of the long nights, my grandmother wakened me and whispered, “Come, Odin, look!” Her voice held a note of wonder. She led me outside. The wind was still and the sky full of stars as piercing and brittle as ice. The night felt peaceful, solemn.

On the northern horizon, the sky was aflame. Sheets of light in shades of gold and emerald and crimson flashed so brightly that I trembled in amazement. They danced in the sky like lightning and split in waves or drifted about like thistledown. The flames burned nothing, and left awe instead of ashes.

I stared at the majesty and swore like my father, “By the Elder Gods, where does it come from?”

I had seen the aurora borealis before, of course, but never had they been so fierce or captivating.

Even grandmother, wise as she was, had no answer.

“Where does it come from?” I begged again, knowing in my bones that if I marched down the hill and across the frozen fjord, into the treeless north, I might see it better.

“Magic,” she said gently.

I vowed to find its source. I was a fool to do so. Like many young, I revered the wise, but too often, wisdom is only knowledge bought with great pain. Perhaps, sometimes you should run from it.

“Where does it come from?” I begged again.

Wistfully, Grandmother said, “Ask the ravens.”

At the time, I took her answer seriously. I did not know it was an old saying among her tribe, the Svea. To *ask the ravens* was the same as to say, “Who knows?”

But I asked the ravens. When they came north that spring, I listened hard to their cawing and murmurs and ratcheting and watched their eyes until I began to decipher their words. There are small differences in their calls. They caw and make chuckling noises and moans, and if you pay strict attention, you can learn.

Ravens are smart, but their chatter is mostly as worthless as gossip. I began to discern that a certain caw might mean, “Look at how handsome I am!” while another

meant, “Careful, there is an owl in the oaks.” or “Follow me, and I will show you a field where there are mice to eat.”

But if they spoke of more profound, more sacred things, I could not untangle it.

I was six when I first went north to seek the source of magic. A Laplander had come to town with his caribou. He wore a comic red cap with dangling beads all around the sides to keep flies away, and told a tale of an old witch, of the tribe of the Aelfar, who lived in the hills to the North.

I was so foolish at six, I packed a little food into a rucksack, took a walking stick, and headed north. My wolf pups were half-grown and full of playful energy. I asked the ravens to guide me, and a small flock of twelve flew ahead of and around me.

I rowed a fishing boat across the fjord and began to follow the ravens. In those days, all of the Fjords were marked with runestones showing the first letter of the name of the god or goddess worshipped in that fjord, but I followed a twisted path through old, strange rune-covered rocks to find the Aelfar.

Now, I did not know at the time how magical the Aelfar were. You see, normal people travel across land, but

the Aelfar's magic was so strong, they could also travel through time. With the guidance of those ravens, I was able to follow their path, probably because I had a child's pure resolve.

The trip took me only a league north of my home, perhaps to the land where the aurora borealis had sprung from, but it was also eons in the past, in warmer times.

I reached the Aelfar at sundown and found her longhouse. It was not made of wood but was instead a round hut. The tusks of woolly elephants were all stacked up like spears, and then covered over with hairy hide.

A woolly elephant with massive tusks stood guard outside her hut waiting patiently, as if hoping she would come out to scratch his trunk. To me, it seemed big as a hill. It was early summer, and the huge creature stank with that peculiar scent that woolly elephants have, and green-bottle flies buzzed around it in clouds, shining in the sunlight like sparks from a fire.

In some stories, witches are always beautiful beyond mortal dreams. In others they are horrid creatures with a pookah's long nose. This one was plain, a woman with pale green eyes and hair the color of honey. She wore a robe

woven from living honeysuckles that covered her small breasts, and all the flowers were in bloom. She hunched over a cooking fire.

When I stood before her door, my wolf pups rollicked in the dust in her yard as if they'd been there often, and she called. "Come inside, young god. I have what you seek!"

I wondered that she called me a god. I thought that maybe I had misheard her or that she had mistaken me for someone else.

She sat cooking a dove on a skewer over simmering coals, and the spices on it smelled like something that could only be found at the tables of Valhalla. I remember marveling that the fire gave off no smoke, which should have clouded the small room, yet the embers were cherry red.

I sat across the fire from her on a rock, and she smiled at me, a motherly smile. I felt my face heat, for her attire left little to the imagination.

A small white ermine came out from under her skirts, sniffed at me, and then darted back inside. I looked up at her face, and seven blue-white moths were circling her head like a living crown. Their wings glowed like moonlight.

She said, “Bjorn told me you would come. You saw my mage fires, and you have come searching for wisdom.”

“Yes,” I said, sounding more surprised than I wanted. I worried that she was evil, for she had spoken to the dead.

She nodded thoughtfully.

Now, many stories have been told of how I lost my eye, but this one is true, and I tell it to you not because I believe it is wise to always be honest, but because you alone, especially, need to know the truth.

She said, “If it is wisdom you want, there is a small price to pay, of course....”

I had little to trade. I feared she would ask for my most valuable possession, a wolf pup, and I mourned inside because I decided instantly that I would trade her one.

“I don’t have much,” I pleaded, hoping she would not demand the pup.

“You are richer than you know,” she said. She took a sharp stick and used it to stir the red-hot coals until fire bright as a forge leapt among them.

“The price of magic,” she said, “is cheap.” She smiled knowingly at my wolves. They rolled outside in the fading

sunlight. She glanced at a trio of ravens perched on her elephant's back. "Yet few are willing to make the sacrifice."

She smiled sadly and said, "I can't take a wolf pup. It would never give itself to me. Its heart would always be yours."

I must have looked toward it, for suddenly I felt a gouging pain, and fire seemed to blossom in my eye. I turned to the Aelfar, and the witch had stabbed me with her poker. She pulled the stick away, and my eye was impaled upon it, smoking.

She laughed lightly, as if at a joke. "You wish to know the source of the magic? You cannot see it with human eyes. You must open your inner eye, hidden behind your old one!"

I was weeping and in pain and my eye burned with holy fire, but I opened my inner eye then and saw the witch. I saw her not as a man sees, but with my more perceptive inner eye.

She was not young and pretty and desirable, as I had imagined. Instead, as I saw her as a rotted piece of flesh, nothing more than a wight, and the hollow little shelter we were in was no more than a burial mound, her barrow.

Yet even as I realized this, she twisted away and became a naked newborn babe lying on the ground, kicking and screaming, and then turned into a young girl that blossomed into a gorgeous naked youth with wanton eyes.

Then she stood at full height and aged into an older woman, one I recognized, with a craggy face filled with wisdom: it was the face from the Godtree that grew near my home. Before me stood Freya herself!

She faded into smoke that hovered above the campfire, and the last rays of sunlight touched upon the little hill. When I went outside, a gloom was over the land.

The hairy elephant was gone, and where I had seen a tent supported by ivory tusks, was a large boulder.

I was in terrible pain, blinking furiously. Tears and blood flowed from my eye socket, and I could hardly see with my mortal eye. Bats were beginning to weave through the gloom in their nightly dance.

So I headed home, half feeling my way. I could hardly see the mortal world, but on that evening, I woke to worlds beyond. I learned to stare, to gaze with my inner eye.

I crawled beneath the branches of the World Tree and peered up to Asgard in the heavens above. I felt my way

through misty Nilfheim and spoke with the shade of Bjorn. I skirted the underworld and the lair of the Great Wyrn.

And that night, as I rowed toward town, the aurora struck. Unseen by mortal men, it flowed over our village, like a wildfire fanning out over the hill.

Just like a fire, the magic struck. In a wildfire, when the flames sweep through grass, they do not burn brightly, but if they strike a tree that is dry, the ripe fire explodes with pitch and lights up the sky. The fire grows so hot, it consumes the tree greedily, even down to the roots deep in the ground.

I saw magic sweep through our village, and when it hit some people, they caught fire. I was one of them. I burst into flame like a beacon on a hill.

Most people never even notice. They may feel a tingle, recognize the magic, but don't understand who and what they are. They never awaken to their own power.

I became a God that day.

I tell you this because over the centuries, I have seen magic sweep over the earth many times. I have seen the mage fires swirling in the heavens, and today I saw them.

They swept across the land early this morning, unnoticed by human eyes, but I saw them take hold in you.

Just as with me, the fires took you, root to branch, bole to crown, and now they burn in *you*.

You will become more than a wizard if you will just open your inner eye. Look inside yourself, and you will see that this is true. You are one of us, and so as a messenger of the Gods, I have come to welcome you.

Some imagine that Gods are jealous, because we do not interfere with the affairs of men when they fall. But a good father learns to let his child walk under his own power, so that he can carry himself, and run someday.

I want you to rise up and become the God I know you can be.

Never stop in your search for wisdom. The price is small and the rewards are unimaginable to you now. The wise man runs toward wisdom.

Your search will be a long one, lasting more than a lifetime, but you will find the source of magic. All you need to do is keep both eyes open.